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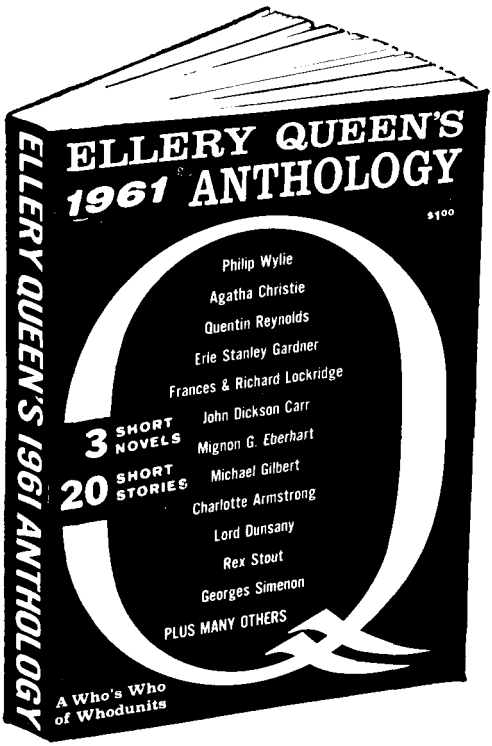

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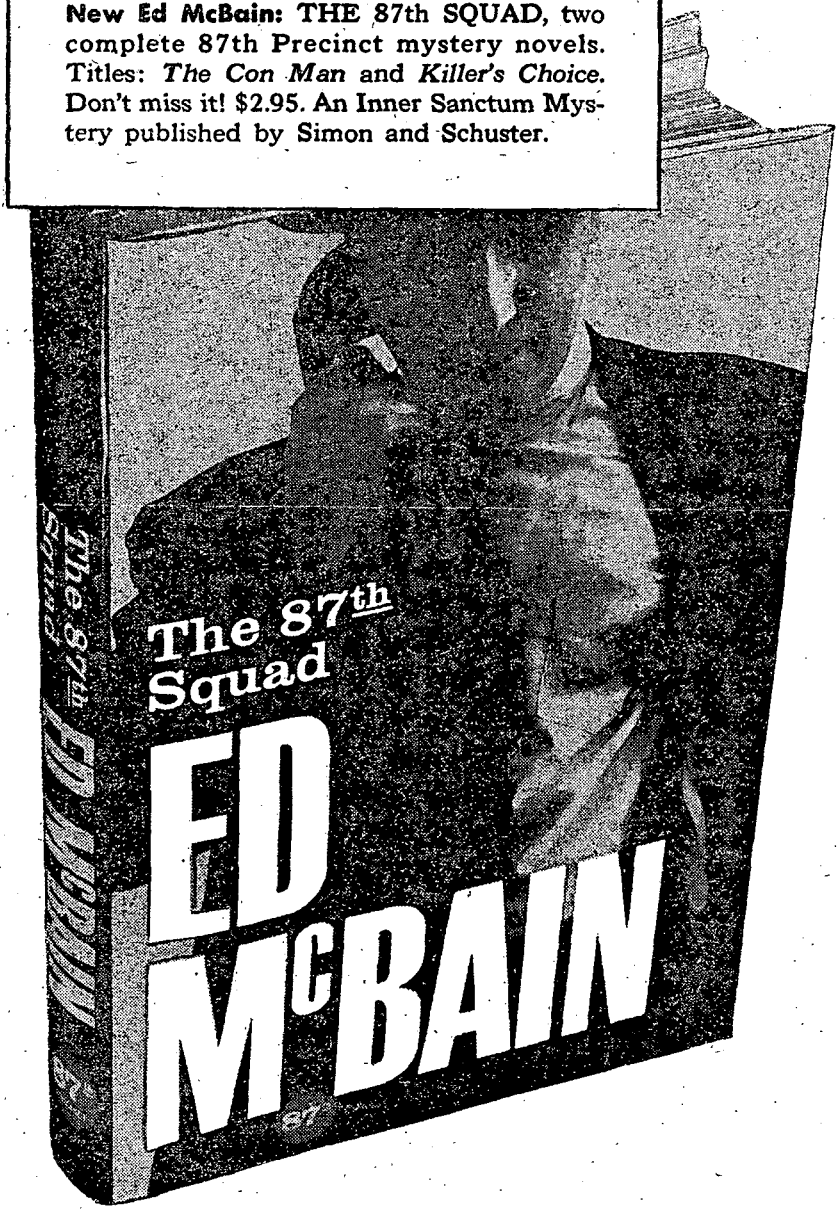

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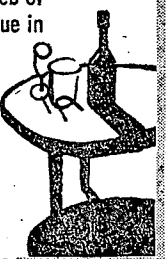

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DETECTION AND CRIME

MISS MARPLE AND THE WICKED WORLD — *Agatha Christie* — 21

ADVENTURE OF THE SPECTACLED BAND — *Robert L. Fish* — 29

THE NORWEGIAN APPLE MYSTERY — *James Holding* — 38

THE CHICKEN FEATHER OF RUMOR — *Charles B. Child* — 68

THE BOLDEST COURSE — *Cyril Hare* — 103

THE BACK STAIRWAY — *Hal Ellson* — 123

DETECTIVE NOVELETTE

THE FACES OF DANGER — *Rufus King* — 6–106

RIDDLE STORY

THE BET ON MISS RAINEY — *Irvin S. Cobb* — 52

EQMM "FIRST STORIES"

GIVE ME YOUR ANSWER, DO — *Ann Rylah* — 60

THE WAY IT USED TO BE — *Elaine Slater* — 82

BLACK MASK MAGAZINE

THE CACKLE BLADDER — *William Campbell Gault* — 85

MYSTERY HARDCOVERS OF THE MONTH — 122

MYSTERY PAPERBACKS OF THE MONTH — 51

BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH — *Anthony Boucher* — 67

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a new story by

AUTHOR: **RUFUS KING**

TITLE: ***The Faces of Danger***

EDITORS' FILE CARD

TYPE: Detective Novelette

DETECTIVE: Stuff Driscoll

LOCALE: Halcyon, Florida

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Lucille Bellington and Lyle Dasher, both fabulously rich, had only benevolence in their hearts for their Foundation. But in the background was an evil and ruthless force . . . Who? Why? And who would be the next to die?*

THE TRADE WINDS SWEPT THEIR leisured passage along Florida's eastern seaboard. They brushed its sands. They flowed across the balcony of Mr. Galli's costly suite in the Hotel Napoleon I, and entered its living room where Mr. Galli was conferring with his accomplice, Madame Freda Alcott.

In his stylized Sicilian manner of speech Mr. Galli was saying, "Apart from the fact that Miss Bellington is a young woman of great wealth, and from a visual veiwpoint unprepossessing, what facets of character have you unearthed that will be of value to our discreet assignment?"

Madame Alcott, who a decade or two ago had once been partially tapped for the Met, announced in her unique *mezzo-basso,* "Her sincerity is beyond question. No breath of scandal has ever touched her. In hideous truth, I have found her a paragon of all the virtues."

"Excellent. Then the threat of exposure will bring her to her knees."

"Among her more irritating conceits," Madame Alcott continued, "is an obsession for the poetical

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works of Algernon Charles Swinburne. Even to oral quotes."

"Ah! But that is precisely in line with the information I require. It is priceless. *O love, O lover, loose or hold me fast, I have thee first, whoever have thee last*—stuff like that would provide the perfect answer."

Mr. Galli thereupon sketched for Madame Alcott an outline of their immediate moves, all of which were perilous to the future of Miss Bellington, and as devious as Mr. Galli's Borgia-type blood.

"It boils down to one simple fact," he said. "She must be trapped into committing herself in writing. Notes, letters—we will determine the exact medium later—but of such a nature that when we deliver it to our client he can dangle it as a sword of Damocles over Miss Bellington's head. And now tell me this: were you able to gauge the depth of her emotions toward her fiancé?"

Madame Alcott's superb bosom gave a profound heave. "To one, such as myself, who has squeezed the very essence of passion even from a stone, their romance is an anemic jest. She admires Lyle Dasher. She is comfortable with him. But love him? Absurd!"

"Good. Then our proposed strategy strikes you as effective?"

"Beyond doubt."

"Another point: did you determine just how far she has progressed with the Governor?"

"Miss Bellington has had several audiences at Tallahassee and his Excellency is enchanted. They are already considering a suitable tract for the Foundation—a thousand or more acres of state-owned land. All that is now required, the Governor pointed out, is a sufficiently aroused and favorable public opinion to sway the legislature into giving its stamp of approval."

"Which is precisely where you will come in as Publicity Director for the Bellington Foundation."

"One takes it for granted," Madame Alcott said with a hardening of her theatrical eyes, "that our client's financial rating is sufficient to meet our fee?"

"Fifty thousand?" Mr. Galli shrugged a set of expensively padded shoulders. "To him, a mere bagatelle. For example, our Berne correspondent reports a receipt from the Union Bank of Switzerland, Zurich, for a million dollars deposited by check drawn on the Hibernia National Bank of New Orleans and credited to our client's personal account. I could go on—there are fortunes secreted in banks all over the world."

Mr. Galli gazed for a moment through the balcony jalousies—out across the enigmantic reaches of the Atlantic Ocean. His eyes were bleak. "Unhappily," he said, "there is the other side of the coin. Any failure on our part would result in a payment more deadly than fifty thousand dollars."

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Madame Alcott waved any such contingency aside. "We have never failed. We shall not now."

Mr. Galli returned from the Atlantic Ocean. "And now that you have established the tepid emotional balance between Miss Bellington and her fiancé, do you not agree that having Herschel Pompey as your aide is an absolutely perfect choice?"

Madame Alcott evoked a mind's-eye portrait of Herschel Pompey, a young buck from Massachusetts, recently recruited among the operatives in Mr. Galli's singular business agency which posed under the trade name of *Services Unlimited*.

Herschel Pompey's physique, as she evoked it, was superb with the rippled muscles of youth. His face was of a nature that even a mother-in-law would trust, while his eyes were dark-lashed and of a candor-blue.

"Dear friend," she said compassionately, "you are out of your head. Surely you must concede that the very heart of Lucille Bellington's project is to rehabilitate the physically disabled—and Herschel Pompey is the least disabled physical animal I have ever met. He is a veritable god!"

"Too true."

"Well, then?"

"Let us suppose," Mr. Galli murmured smugly, "that he were deaf and dumb."

"But he isn't."

"No, he is not," Mr. Galli agreed. And absently added, "Not yet."

The quartet, somnolent in bamboo lounge chairs on the terrace beside Lucille Bellington's papaya-shaped swimming pool, afforded a good composite picture of Florida's Gold Coast human fauna.

It was composed of Madame Alcott, frighteningly encased in a cerise terry-cloth robe beneath which strained a tropical swim suit picked out in a dolphin motif; Lucille, in a more conservative cabana toilette; her fiancé, Lyle Dasher, loosely stolid in a pair of plum-toned Janssen trunks; and Herschel Pompey, the *fanfaron*, the bully boy of Mr. Galli's choice. They were occupied with reading in the morning papers the day's publicity releases on Lucille's philanthropic brain child.

The general *mix-en-scène* comprised the original Bellington homestead in Halcyon—a reserved, almost rural township that breathes unconcerned between the swelter of Miami and the suaver Venetian-canal effects of Fort Lauderdale.

Grandfather Eustace had settled in Halcyon with an eye on tomatoes which were, of that era and district, a lucrative commercial crop and became the basis of the Bellington pile—later judiciously transferred to papayas, then juiced and frozen into Lucille's present fistful of millions.

It would be a mistake to underestimate Lucille. True, the quixotic,

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the idealistic keynotes of her character almost smothered her native common sense; but enough of it remained in action to check her from developing into a feminized version of the village idiot.

Years ago—she was now 22—Lucille had given up all hope of being swept off her feet by any prototype of Mister America for her sake alone, said sake, as Mr. Galli had pointed out, being unalluring to a generous degree.

Following papa's and mama's sad deaths in a plane crash in the Ozarks, Lucille's status as sole heiress to the Bellington fortune had made her justifiably suspicious of the several men of assorted vintages, titles, and handsome façades who had claimed to be smitten with her charms. Hence, one can only suppose, the reason for her current betrothal to Lyle Dasher.

Lyle was safe. Furthermore, for anyone to label him a fortune hunter would cause eyebrows along the Gold Coast to raise in scornful heights, as the Dasher bundle (Griptread Tires) not only equaled the Bellington papayas, but surpassed them by several significant digits.

Loot then being ruled out, what was left? Love? Their friends in general doubted it, preferring compatability as an answer—two earnest, solvent souls with a strong similarity in ideals and in an overall do-goodness.

Concerning the *fanfaron*, the now presumably muted and deafened young terrorist, Herschel Pompey: Madame Alcott's previously noted description failed to do the modern Adonis complete justice. Even in this golden, suntanned land of Florida, where the noteworthy male body rates a dime a dozen, Herschel Pompey in skintight navy briefs stood among his competitors as a blinding sun, and his effect on the opposite sex can only be assessed as pulverizing.

Lucille, who for several years now had steeled herself against just such visual impacts, and who furthermore was sitting within fingertip touch of her comfortable fiancé, could not subdue a strange warmth within her chest that might, if left uncontrolled, burst dangerously into a flame.

Her pity was already on the simmer whenever her thoughts lingered compassionately on the heroic event that had rendered this admirable chassis of young manhood deaf and dumb.

Madame Alcott had given Lucille the Galli version of the unhappy occurrence in a competent imitation of her favorite school of acting: ". . . and thus it was that with a pantherine clutch Herschel swept the child safely back from the cliff's brink, and in doing this thoughtful act lost his balance. Down! Fifty—sixty—seventy feet down plunged his body and, with its head in advance, crashed into the boiling, rock-infested coastal

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waters of the State of Massachusetts." (All this with a running obbligato of telling gestures, closed eyes, and bosomly heaves.) "The shock—the impact—the deep submerge, up from which he gallantly debouched himself as a local hero of indisputable réclamé. But also, alas, as a now permanently deaf-and-dumb total mute."

Being ever the most trusting of creatures, Lucille had accepted this dramatic bag of hot popcorn in complete good faith. Just as trustingly as she had accepted Madame Alcott's Galli-arranged credentials as Publicity Director for the upcoming "Revels Humane"—a charity ball to be given in the beach auditorium as the final fillip toward establishing public support for Lucille's project.

Whether it was Lucille or Lyle Dasher who originated the Foundation idea is debatable, and it had best be considered as having come to them a month or so ago in a joint revelation. Both had been drying off from a dip in the surf and watching television in a Bellington cabana. The broadcast had dealt with a manufacturing concern up north, the personnel of which was exclusively composed of disabled people.

"Why—" Lucille had said.

"Why—" Lyle had said.

"Why," both had said, "not establish such a foundation right here in Florida?"

To give any detailed picture of the program later worked out and presented by Lucille to his Excellency—the various plants, equipment, housing, commissary, and the whole maze of logistics—would only obliterate the human drama in the grand plan. It is enough to say that these details were compiled by a high-salaried professional staff and put into the blueprint and statistical stage. This portion of the undertaking fell within Lyle Dasher's department, but he had insisted, perhaps from some abstruse business or sentimental reason, that the job be credited to his betrothed alone and thus publicized as the Bellington Foundation . . .

"An odd thing happened this morning," Lucille was now saying, "as I came back from the beach. A face."

Madame Alcott gave her a startled look and echoed, "A face?"

"Yes. Just a glimpse of it among the bougainvillaea."

Lyle Dasher wanted to know whose face, while Herschel Pompey let his candor-blue eyes rest on Lucille with a well-done stab at the questioning noncomprehension of a deaf-mute.

"I don't know whose face. As I say, it was only a glimpse and then—well, it sort of evaporated."

"Did it scare you?" Lyle asked.

"Why should it? There's always a sprinkle of trespassing tourists during the season. But this one was different. His eyes."

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"What about his eyes?"

"They had the Bela Lugosi touch, if you know what I mean. In that vampire series, just as he steps out of the coffin."

"Did you go after him?"

"Why on earth should I? The thing's of no consequence."

Now that the Episode of the Face had been explored, Madame Alcott took over with her agenda for the day. "I have an appointment," she said, "with Molly Newhouse of Channel 10 TV. Lucille, you will be interviewed by her tomorrow on that current events program for procrastinating housewives. Herschel, in poignant muteness, shall sit at your side. His role a symbol, a tragic *éclaircissement* —"

"An out-and-out tear jerker," Lyle Dasher muttered, for the trace of a certain radiance that tinged his betrothed's cheeks whenever she was in the proximity of muscle boy Pompey had not escaped his attention.

"—*éclaircissement,*" Madame Alcott repeated coldly, "of the Armageddon that is so shortly to be crowned by the Revels Humane. And now Lyle, dear boy, there are certain statistical details I shall require in order to develop a proper outline for the interview. I shall be dressed in an hour. Be good enough to meet me then within."

"Within," in the opera-ese, signified the house proper. This was a large turreted affront to Spanish-American architecture that Grandfather Eustace had dreamed up, obviously during one of his more exalted bourbon-and-branch-water moments.

Their departure—Madame Alcott to her chambers within, Lyle Dasher toward the adjoining Griptread Tires estate—left Lucille alone with the Pompey torso for the first moment since he had been introduced into the ménage yesterday evening by Madame Alcott and installed as a house guest.

The moment was one of those strange ones that are so aptly referred to as being fraught with romance. Even the Floridian semi-tropical flora conspired to set the scene. Mimosa perfume vied with the scent of frangipani, the flame stars of hibiscus vied with the clustering carmine rivulets of bougainvillaea, while gardenias shot their meaty fragrance all over the florid lot.

Conversation with the muted and the unlearned in lip reading failed, Lucille discovered, to lend itself to any chatty volleying of thoughts. With Herschel Pompey the job had to be accomplished in writing, for which Mr. Galli had considerately supplied his *fanfaron* with a small loose-leaf notebook, an ample batch of fillers, and a good ballpoint pen of the type not balked by any chance smearings of the more expensive spread.

Just the simple act of passing the notebook back and forth, with ev-

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ery attendant slender contact of a knuckle or thumb, would give Lucille a gentle electric thrill. She neither pondered on nor tried to dissect this minor phenomenon, although subconsciously she did appreciate that nothing like it had happened whenever Lyle Dasher handed her a canapé at cocktail time or a hot dog at a cookout.

Several of the loose-leaf pages had been covered by questions and answers of a harmless and, to be painstakingly frank, an insipid character before one of Herschel's written replies shot an arrow deep into the heart of Lucille's emotional equilibrium.

"Do you do much reading?" she had written.

"Mostly poetry," Herschel had written in reply. "Swinburne."

That did it. The smoulder in Lucille's chest kindled more warmly toward this modest, this spectacular chemical composition of flesh and bone and blood, now so sadly muted because of his gallant act in saving a child's life. His avowed written penchant for the poet Swinburne stamped him irrevocably for Lucille as a kindred soul. From that dark, fate-shadowed moment, Herschel was without doubt her boy.

But since all exquisite interludes must sometime end, Lucille, having a late morning appointment at Halcyon's Chez d'Or beauty trap to get her hair done, reluctantly left for the house to dress.

Herschel did not accompany her. He remained seated at the poolside, waiting until assured that no eyes—servants, yard boys, trespassing Lugosis, what-have-yous—were within spying view.

He was a rather shaken young man. He had not affiliated himself with Mr. Galli's dubious enterprises solely from any compulsion toward the fast buck. He had needed money, yes. Desperately and plenty of it, but not primarily for his own sake.

Herschel had a younger sister Estelle over whom he had stood as a tough protector since their parents' slightly alcoholic deaths five years ago, a sister whose tragic physical condition required an expensive operation or (in the patois of his social circle) else. This far from unusual type of situation is touched on simply to reveal that Herschel Pompey was not all bad, even though by every rational standard of ethical society he was plenty bad enough.

The small ferment that was now shaking him was Lucille. The intimate quarter of an hour just spent in her company had established a realization that outwardly she not only resembled his tigerishly protected sister Estelle, but her fine insides reflected Estelle's comparably fine ones.

His Atlas shoulders shrugged the bothersome impression away. He rose and began a stroll, not toward the house but along a path

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that led into a tropical planting of palm trees, the trunks of which were curtained by the daisylike orange flowers of the Mexican flame vine.

In the center of this secluded grove, on a clearing bordered with a tall hedging of hibiscus, stood a laticework gazebo that had been conceived by Grandfather Eustace as a handy trysting place for his lustier moments of private dalliance.

Herschel went into the summerhouse's emptiness and sat down at a marble-topped table. He snapped open the hasps of the notebook and removed the pages that were covered with Lucille's jottings and his own.

A voice, coming from within the close hibiscus hedge, spoke quietly in the morning stillness.

"Put the pages under a cushion of the settee. I will get them later."

Herschel, hewing to the line of Mr. Galli's previous briefing, did not turn his head in the direction from which the voice had come. He said, as quietly, "All right."

He stood and moved over to a rattan settee.

"Anything usable?" the voice asked.

"I think there is. She got on the Swinburne kick. When it's pieced together and photostated it could read like hot stuff."

"Good. Plug a time element next. Some specific hour. Some specific place suggestive of an assignation."

"All right."

"And this is important. Have a newspaper handy. Get her to write her comments on some current racket investigation. Work in some lead questions that will bring out an indignant reaction from her. Do you understand?"

"Got you."

They exchanged a few more pertinent remarks before the voice said, "Now go back to the house."

Silence took over and Herschel stepped outside, muted again as the morning was mute. His eyes flicked casually on the general section of the hibiscus hedge from which the voice had come. Some leaves stirred in the breezeless air.

It was a while later, when Herschel was dressing for luncheon, that a doubt began to disturb him. Had the spot in the hedge where the leaves had stirred been the same one from which the voice had come? In retrospect it seemed questionable.

Of course the speaker could have moved . . .

A few words about the Face . . .

We can skip at once any childish notion that it was attached to a vampire. It belonged to a man named Woodberry Jones, a bachelor, 27 years of age, a touch on the slipshod side (otherwise his features would not have been apparent among the bougainvillaea), and a fairly adept member of his provocative profession. Physically,

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Jones was a wiry little man, his general appearance verging on that of a jockey.

His movements that morning, after the flash of his face seen by Lucille, had been mostly sedentary. He had crouched among a planting of orange-jessamine from where he had commanded a view of the terrace and the swimming pool.

Jones had observed the quartet, later reduced to a duet, finally to the solitary musings of Herschel Pompey.

With the stealth of a red Indian, Jones had tailed Herschel to the gazebo, then had masked himself within the encircling hibiscus hedge.

He had observed the placing of the carefully written-upon loose-leaf pages beneath a cushion of the rattan settee.

He had heard the Voice.

He had heard the supposedly deaf-and-dumb Herschel speak in reply.

He had observed Herschel's departure from the gazebo and his leisurely disappearance along the pathway to the house.

He had started to pencil a notation on the inside surface of a match folder when a slender, whiplike cord of some peculiar nature circled his throat from behind and was viciously yanked tight.

At the end of one minute and forty-seven seconds of agony Woodberry Jones was dead.

Noon arrived on schedule and the day slid past it into what, in greetings, the true Floridian refers to as "good evening"—"good afternoon" apparently being *non de rigeur*.

Lucille had had her hair modishly done, unhappily without any noticeable improvement in allure. Madame Alcott had conferred with Lyle Dasher on certain aspects of the Foundation's plans, then had sped in a Bellington car to arrange for Lucille's TV interview for the following day. Herschel Pompey had boned up on his Swinburne and earmarked several inflammatory items in the paper for later use in edging Lucille toward her prospective note-writing doom.

And the body of Mr. Woodberry Jones—now located at some distance from his point of earthly departure—lay still undiscovered.

Twilight and the cocktail hour came.

Because of Florida's delirious night life this pleasant pause was held indoors in what Grandfather Eustace's ultra-baroque architect, a Mr. Pittwit Simpson, had labeled the Granada Room.

Hopper, the Bellington butler, billowed in and out serving paste canapés and a rum cocktail slider that was based on papaya juice and called Strike Three.

Madame Alcott, in a multi-flounced frock of lilac cotton, sat regaling Lyle Dasher with a spicy

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anecdote concerning her final rendezvous with a now long-perished Swedish count at his hunting lodge in the vasternorrland.

Lucille and Herschel Pompey were busy at their passed-notebook chatting. In comment on a newspaper item covering a revolution against a ruthless dictator in the Caribbean she was writing—*under similar circumstances I would work toward overthrowing the government with no qualms about being called a traitor*—when the wail of a siren pierced the room from along the stretches of the coastal highway.

The wail rose to a crescendo. then whined out.

"Funny," Lucille said. "That seemed to stop right at the gates."

"Beach patrol car," Lyle said. "Just the usual drunk-driver mess."

The wail of a second siren rose to its crecendo and, in turn, whimpered out.

"Hopper," Lucille aid.

"Miss Bellington?"

"Go down to the gates, please. See what it's about."

Hopper left.

He returned.

He said, "It's the dead body of a man, Miss Bellington. Probably tossed from a car into the boxthorn, a little north of the gates. That is the opinion of Officer Davis."

Lucille's immediate reaction was strangely, intuitively, bougainvillaea. Being a young woman of impulse, and perhaps impelled by a sense of responsibility over dead bodies recklesly tossed into the boxthorn on her property, she decided to inspect the scene.

A description of Spot X shows us a pair of massive wrought-iron gates standing open between coquina posts, on either side of which extend a six-foot high Provençal fencing of cedar palings. Against this is banked a planting of boxthorn to afford a decorative space between it and the coastal highway's shoulder. In this greenery lay the late Woodberry Jones.

As noted by Hopper, the beach patrol car had contained Officer Charles Davis. Siren Number 2 had deposited Stuff Driscoll, the Sheriff's chief criminal investigator.

Stuff was a smooth apple of the neo-school of law enforcer. He was still young, personable, soundly grounded in the varied branches of criminology including the medico-legal, and unobtrusively coated with a University Club veneer. He was on hand purely by chance—en route from the Seahorse Towers Motel (where he was holed up in Halcyon on assignment) to a beach tavern when the wail of Officer Davis's siren had shifted him into official gear.

The site—the Bellington gates—of the body's resting place gave Stuff a jolt of concern. His assignment in Halcyon was involved, *sub rosa,* with the B. Foundation.

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One look at the body's face deepened his concern into mild shock—an effect not entirely lost on Davis.

"Know him?" Davis asked.

"Yes," Stuff said, after a thoughtful pause.

"Rackets? Goon job, wouldn't you say?"

"No, I wouldn't. In fact, he rates the VIC treatment complete." This was a departmental joke, the initials standing for Very Important Corpse.

The law's machinery prepared to mesh. But before the arrival of the Assistant Medical Examiner and the bright-brain boys, Lucille had taken a good look at Jones's face.

"That's the one," she said to Stuff, who stood at her side while Davis was using the patrol car telephone. "I had a weird feeling it would be. Becaue of his eyes. I saw him this morning lurking in the bougainvillaea."

Stuff's lips tightened. He held his voice down. "Miss Bellington, don't ask me to explain this at the moment, but please say nothing to anyone about recognizing this man—not a single word."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"I know you don't. Just go back to the house. I will join you there later. And try to appreciate this: the whole future of your Foundation might be jeopardized if you don't keep silence—*especially to reporters*—about having spotted this man prowling your grounds."

The Bellington chef, Signor Alfred Friggoni, while not sporting a *cordon bleu* of royal blueness did at least deserve a ribbon of the paler shade known as Alice.

His main dish for the evening's little dinner consisted of the burly claws of stone crabs expertly soused in boiling water and served with a sauce of drawn butter that breathed a scent of garlic and was prettily flecked with minced parsley. Now strange and impossible as the fact may seem, this entrée, perfect in its simplicity, was ultimately to trigger the solution to Mr. Jones's garroted exit.

Four people ate it—Lucille, Madame Alcott, Herschel Pompey, and dining *en famille,* Lyle Dasher. The upper echelon of the service staff also ate it, while the lower plateaus were fed with a casserole of yesterday's beef.

After the meal, Madame Alcott and Lyle Dasher retired to the Granada Room for brandy and backgammon, a contest that Herschel Pompey sat kibitzing in comely muteness.

Lucille betook herself with a sheaf of notes concerning the forthcoming TV interview to the room which Mr. Pittwit Simpson had dubbed the Lisbon Den. Its casement windows were of leaded glass and a pair of them served as a doorway to the terrace.

She sat down at a desk, placed the notes on its flat Spanish-American top, and then ignored them.

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She was worried. She had kept silence during the dinner hour, in line with Stuff Driscoll's request. But what, she pondered, *could* the death of the stranger, as Mr. Driscoll had implied to the point of melodrama, have to do with the fate of her Foundation?

Lucille's clouded eyes were drawn to the terrace door by a tapping on glass. She went over, opened it, and Stuff Driscoll stepped in. He apologized for the unconventional entrance, sat down on a cowhide fauteuil, and said, "You must have thought me a touch cockeyed, Miss Bellington out there by the gates. The reason lay in publicity. Bad publicity."

Something in Stuff's manner gave Lucille the impression that he was handing her a bit of a runaround. "Bad publicity for the Foundation, Mr. Driscoll?"

"Yes, but more particularly for those affiliated with it."

As Lucille saw it, that would include the Governor. She said, "Even the Governor?"

Stuff sidestepped into generalization. "Politics, Miss Bellington. Always a delicate matter of balance. And public opinion is never absent from the scales."

Lucille said with plenty of justification, "You're confusing me, Mr. Driscoll. I do wish you would be more direct."

There was nothing Stuff would have wished for more—to clarify for this amiable, kindly, filthily rich young woman the results of his past hour's inspection of the Bellington grounds—a tour tactfully engaged in while the occupants of Grandfather Eustace's gaudy eyesore had discussed the claws of Chef Friggoni's stone crabs.

He would have liked to disclose to Miss Bellington the several faces of danger indicated during the inspection. Danger to her, to the Governor, even to points higher and beyond.

The body, it developed, had not been tossed from a car. It had been boosted over the Provençal cedar fencing and let fall into the boxthorn.

According to an estimate made by Dr. Vic Young, the Assistant Medical Examiner, death had come around noon.

Stuff had not needed the prowess of a Leatherstocking to backtrack through the tropical plantings and locate the point of origin where Jones had been choked to death. All indications established that Jones, when attacked, had been crouching in the hibiscus that circled the gazebo.

This was emphasized by a match folder and the stub of a pencil that presumably had fallen from Jones's hands at the moment of assault. An examination of the match folder had disclosed on the inner surface of its cover the beginning of a notation. Three letters to be exact, then the pencil point must have strag-

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gled off under the effect of shock.

The three letters were Rev.

In Stuff's opinion they formed the beginning of the word Revels. The "Revels Humane." It was a natural assumption for Stuff to reach since he was perfectly aware of Jones's assignment in Halcyon and, more pinpointedly, in the Bellington grounds.

To explain: the Governor on the day of his first interview with Lucille concerning the Foundation had been in an amiably melting mood. The morning had offered a glorious extravaganza of Florida's sunswept splendor. Breakfast at the mansion had included his favorite dish, Eggs Ponce de Leon—a southern confection involving celery, green peppers, mushrooms and, as a starter, eggs. Yesterday's session of the legislature had slapped down the Republicans but good and was slated to smack them down again today. In short, the climate of his mind was what P. T. Barnum would have considered "receptive."

So he had gone overboard. Lucille's Foundation seemed a natural for further embellishing the éclat of the state. Just as Boys' Town had put that place on the philanthropic map, so would Lucille's Foundation provide a similar nationwide benevolent publicity for Florida.

"I am all for it, Miss Bellington," he is reputed to have said. "I shall back you to the hilt."

However, the Governor was not a chump, otherwise he would never have become a governor. On its surface, the proposed Bellington Foundation was an admirable thing; but having taken the impulsive plunge in several press interviews of backing it to the hilt, and with a thousand or more acres of state-owned taxpayers' land involved, the Governor's second thoughts advised him to hedge his bet. This was a habit that had lent itself considerably to his noteworthy political success.

Therefore, word had sifted down from his personal gubernatorial lips to the State Attorney, thence to the Sheriff's department, thence to Stuff Driscoll, and from Stuff to Woodberry Jones.

The word was: keep a veiled eye on this Bellington Foundation clambake and make sure that everything is legitimate.

Incidentally, there was never any question in the Governor's mind of Lucille's integrity, nor of the Foundation's admirable purpose. But fraud had been perpetrated before, using trustful men or women of impeccable character and immaculate social and financial standing as a public mask. And sometimes the nature of the fraud had been dangerously, repellently, a cloak for far worse villainy.

Woodberry Jones, Stuff believed, must have stumbled on some warning signal during his stakeout at the gazebo. Something, surely un-

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known to Miss Bellington, was rotten in the Foundation woodpile—rotten enough to have bred murder.

Just what had Jones uncovered? What link existed beyond the one suggested by Jones's dying message—Rev, the beginning of the words "Revels Humane"? It had been important enough for the killer to have made an instant, unplanned attack with whatever weapon was on hand. The cord, the *something,* that had left its curious traces on the groove of strangulation, and scrapings from the body's fingernails, were even now being intricately tested in the lab.

It was a difficult problem. The murder of Jones must be solved, his killer determined and booked; the fraud that lay cancerously concealed within the Foundation must be sliced out by secret surgery; and the entire operation must be accomplished without any breath of deleterious publicity to the political career of his Excellency or to the good name of the heretofore unblemished Miss Bellington.

It was quite a chore. Stuff set about the initial stage with tact and a heavy leaning on the oblique approach. His guarded interest lay in the moments bordering on noon, the approximate time when Jones had been killed, and he mentally filed all pertinent facts covering the poolside quartet as he angled them from Lucille.

To wit: Madame Alcott's departure in terry-cloth and picked-out dolphins to the house to dress; Lyle Dasher's simultaneous exit in plum Janssen trunks toward the adjoining Griptread Tires estate also to dress, with both of them later closeted in conference over details of the TV interview; then the duet of Herschel Pompey and Lucille and their written exchange of chatter with the Swinburne touch.

It was here that Stuff tactfully fished for an account of *Services Unlimited's* connection with the Foundation (Griptread Tires had once employed them locally on a sales campaign) and a more detailed précis on Madame Alcott and Herschel Pompey, including the latter's child-saving act and concurrent plunge into the coastal waters of Massachusetts.

"Around what section of the coast did his happen?" Stuff had asked.

"I believe it was near a town called Bushing," Lucille had said. "Somewhere near the northern border."

Then came the hairdo appointment curtain to the Swinburne duet with Herschel being left at the poolside alone. Stuff had just deposited all this in his mental card index when Lyle suddenly appeared, breathing heavily. His copper-toned skin was partially drained of blood, leaving it a shallow *café au lait,* while sweat glints beaded his brow.

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His voice was timbred with anxiety as he cried out, "Lucille, are you feeling all right?"

It should be fairly obvious by now that Lucille was not a girl who panicked. In spite of her fiancé's unexpected resemblance to a startled faun she said calmly, "I feel fine. What's the matter with you?"

"It's my stomach. Came over me suddenly not ten minutes ago."

"Cramps? Indigestion?"

"Worse. Much worse. I'm sure it was the stone crabs. They've poisoned me."

Stuff promptly took a hand. "Anybody else affected, Mr. Dasher?"

"No. I've asked everyone who ate them. Who are you?"

"This is Mr. Driscoll, dear," Lucille said. "An investigator from the Sheriff's department."

"Oh?" Stuff's official status failed to register—Lyle was far too involved now with colonic quakes. "I've just been poisoned. Fish poisoning. Can be fatal."

"Take it easy, Mr. Dasher."

"Easy! My stomach's killing me. I'm hot all over. My lips are even breaking out in pimples."

"Lyle, dear," Lucille said with concern, "telephone Dr. Natwick!"

"I already have. They said he's gone up to Pompano Beach. Driving. Can't reach him for at least an hour. I think I should swallow some mustard."

"Mr. Dasher," Stuff said firmly, "you come with me."

"Where to?"

"I'll run you down to the Poison Control Center at Jackson Memorial. Dr. Camp will know better than anyone else what should be done."

"Do go, Lyle," Lucille urged.

"Of course I'll go."

"Miss Bellington—"

"Mr. Driscoll?"

"If anyone else should become affected, please call me." He wrote on a card the telephone number of the Seahorse Towers Motel. "If I'm no longer at Memorial, phone me here. If I'm not in, a message will reach me. At any time."

Stuff thought: one murder; one poison attempt.

The evil force behind the Foundation's villainy did not pull its punches. Would the next blow be directed against this girl?

"Call me," he repeated, "at any time. Night or day. About anything, Miss Bellington—*anything*."

(continued on page 106)

NEXT MONTH . . .

HUGH PENTECOST's *Who Wants To Be a Dead Hero?*

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**AGATHA CHRISTIE**
TITLE:	***Miss Marple and the Wicked World***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Miss Marple
LOCALE:	Rathole, England
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*If you were an artist painting an old inn and without being conscious of it you painted drops of blood on the white pavement—well, you'd have been shocked too . . .*

IT'S CURIOUS," SAID JOYCE LEMPRIÈRE, "but I hardly like telling you this story. It happened a long time ago—five years ago to be exact—but it's sort of haunted me ever since. The smiling, bright, top part of it—and the hidden gruesomeness underneath. And the queer thing is that the sketch I painted at the time has become tinged with the same atmosphere.

"When you look at it first, it is just a rough sketch of a little steep Cornish street with the sunlight on it. But if you look long enough at it something sinister creeps in. I have never sold it but I never look at it. It lives in the studio in a corner with its face to the wall.

"The name of the place was Rathole. It is a queer little Cornish fishing village, very picturesque—too picturesque perhaps. There is rather too much of the atmosphere of 'Ye Olde Cornish Tea House' about it. It has shops with bobbed-headed girls in smocks doing hand-illuminated mottoes on parchment. It is pretty and it is quaint, but it is very self-consciously so."

"Don't I know," said Raymond West, groaning. "The curse of the charabanc, I suppose. No matter how narrow the lanes leading down to them no picturesque village is safe."

Joyce nodded. "They are narrow lanes that lead down to Rathole

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and very steep, like the side of a house. Well, to get on with my story. I had come down to Cornwall for a fortnight to sketch. There is an old inn in Rathole, The Polharwith Arms. It was supposed to be the only house left standing by the Spaniards when they shelled the place in fifteen hundred and something."

"Not shelled," said Raymond West, frowning. "Do try to be historically accurate, Joyce."

"Well, at all events they landed guns somewhere along the coast and they fired them and the houses fell down. Anyway, that is not the point. The inn was a wonderful old place with a kind of porch in front built on four pillars. I got a very good pitch and was just settling down to work when a car came creeping and twisting down the hill. Of course, it *would* stop before the inn—just where it was most awkward for me.

"The people got out—a man and a woman—I didn't notice them particularly. She had a kind of mauve linen dress on and a mauve hat. Presently the man came out again and to my great thankfulness drove the car down to the quay and left it there.

"He strolled back past me towards the inn. Just at that moment another beastly car came twisting down and a woman got out of it dressed in the brightest chintz frock I have ever seen—scarlet poinsettias, I think they were—and she had on one of these big native straw hats—Cuban, aren't they?—in very bright scarlet.

"This woman didn't stop in front of the inn but drove the car farther down the street towards the other one. Then she got out and the man seeing her gave an astonished shout. 'Carol,' he cried, 'in the name of all that is wonderful! Fancy meeting you in this out-of-the-way spot. I haven't seen you for years. Hello, there's Margery—my wife, you know. You must come and meet her.'

"They went up the street towards the inn side by side, and I saw the other woman had just come out of the door and was moving down towards them. I had had just a glimpse of the woman called Carol as she passed by me. Just enough to see a powdered chin and a flaming scarlet mouth and I wondered—I just wondered—if Margery would be so very pleased to meet her. I hadn't seen Margery near to, but in the distance she looked dowdy and very prim and proper.

"Well, of course, it was not any of my business, but you get very queer little glimpses of life sometimes and you can't help speculating about them. From where they were standing I could just catch fragments of their conversation that floated down to me. They were talking about bathing. The husband, whose name seemed to be Denis, wanted to take a boat and row round the coast.

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"There was a famous cave well worth seeing, so he said, about a mile long. Carol wanted to see the cave too but she suggested walking along the cliffs and seeing it from the land side. She said she hated boats. In the end they fixed it that way. Carol was to go along the cliff path and to meet them at the cave, and Denis and Margery would take a boat and row round.

"Hearing them talk about bathing made me want to bathe too. It was a very hot morning and I wasn't doing particularly good work. Also, I fancied that the afternoon sunlight would be far more attractive.

"So I packed up my things and went off to a little beach that I knew of—it was quite the opposite direction from the cave and was rather a discovery of mine. I had a ripping bathe there and I lunched off a tinned tongue and two tomatoes, and I came back in the afternoon full of confidence and enthusiasm to get on with my sketch.

"The whole of Rathole seemed to be asleep. I had been right about the afternoon sunlight—the shadows were far more telling. The Polharwith Arms was the principal note of my sketch. A ray of sunlight came slanting obliquely down and hit the ground in front of it and had rather a curious effect.

"I gathered that the bathing party had returned safely, because two bathing suits, a scarlet one and a dark blue one, were hanging from the balcony, drying in the sun.

"Something had gone a bit wrong with one corner of my sketch and I bent over it for some moments trying to put it right. When I looked up again there was a figure leaning against one of the pillars of the Polharwith Arms, who seemed to have appeared there by magic. He was dressed in seafaring clothes and was, I suppose, a fisherman. But he had a long dark beard, and if I had been looking for a model for a wicked Spanish captain I couldn't have imagined anyone better.

"I got to work with feverish haste before he should move away, though from his attitude he looked as if he were prepared to prop up the pillars through all eternity.

"He did move, however, but luckily not until I had got what I wanted. He came over to me and began to talk. Oh, how that man talked!

"'Rathole,' he said, 'was a very interesting place.'

"I knew that already but although I said so, that didn't save me. I had the whole history of the shelling—I mean the destroying—of the village, and how the landlord of the Polharwith Arms was the last man to be killed. Run through on his own threshold by a Spanish captain's sword, and of how his blood spurted out on the pavement and no one could wash out the stain for a hundred years.

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"It all fitted in very well with the languorous drowsy feeling of the afternoon. The man's voice was very suave and yet at the same time there was an undercurrent in it of something rather frightening. He was very obsequious in his manner, yet I felt underneath he was cruel. He made me think of the Inquisition.

"All the time he was talking to me I went on painting and suddenly I realized that in the excitement of listening to his story I had painted in something that was not there. On that white square of pavement where the sun fell before the door of the Polharwith Arms, I had painted in bloodstains!

"It seemed extraordinary that the mind could play such tricks with the hand, but as I looked over towards the inn again, I got a second shock. My hand had only painted in what my eyes saw—drops of blood on the white pavement.

"I stared for a minute or two. Then I shut my eyes, said to myself, 'Don't be so stupid—there's nothing there, really.' Then I opened them again, but the bloodstains were still there.

"I suddenly felt I couldn't stand it. I interrupted the fisherman's flood of language.

"'Tell me,' I said, 'my eyesight is not very good. Are those bloodstains on that pavement over there?'

"He looked at me indulgently and kindly.

"'No bloodstains in these days, lady. What I am telling you about is nearly five hundred years ago.'

"'Yes,' I said, 'but *now*—on the pavement'—the words died away in my throat.

"I *knew*—I knew that he wouldn't see what I was seeing.

"I got up and with shaking hands began to put my things together. As I did so the young man who had come in the car that morning came out of the inn door. He looked up and down the street perplexedly. On the balcony above, his wife came out and collected the bathing things. He walked down towards the car but suddenly swerved and came across the road towards the fisherman.

"'Tell me, my man,' he said, 'you don't know whether that lady who came in that second car there has got back yet?'

"'Lady in a dress with flowers all over it? No, sir, I haven't seen her. She went along the cliff towards the cave this morning.'

"'I know, I know. We all bathed there together, and then she left us to walk home and I have not seen her since. It can't have taken her all this time. The cliffs round here are not dangerous, are they?'

"'It depends, sir, on the way you go. The best way is to take a man what knows the place with you.'

"He very clearly meant himself and was beginning to enlarge on the theme, but the young man cut him short unceremoniously and

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ran back towards the inn calling up to his wife on the balcony.

"'I say, Margery, Carol hasn't come back yet. Odd, isn't it?'

"I didn't hear Margery's reply, but her husband went on. 'Well, we can't wait any longer. We have got to push on to Penrithar. Are you ready? I will turn the car.'

"He did so, and presently the two of them drove off together. Meanwhile I had deliberately been nerving myself to prove how ridiculous my fancies were. When the car had gone I went over to the inn and examined the pavement closely.

"Of course there were no bloodstains there. No, all along it had been the result of my distorted imagination. Yet, somehow, it seemed to make the thing more frightening.

"It was while I was standing there that I heard the fisherman's voice.

"He was looking at me curiously. 'You thought you saw bloodstains here, eh, lady?'

"I nodded.

"'That is very curious. We have got a superstition here, lady. If anyone sees those bloodstains—'

"He paused.

"'Well?' I said.

"He went on in his soft voice, Cornish in intonation, but unconsciously smooth and well-bred in its pronunciation, and completely free from Cornish turns of speech.

"'They do say, lady, that if anyone sees those bloodstains that there will be a death within twenty-four hours.'

"Creepy! It gave me a shuddery feeling all down my spine.

"He went on persuasively. 'There is a very interesting tablet in the church, lady, about a death—'

"'No thanks,' I said decisively, and I turned sharply on my heel and walked up the street towards the cottage where I was lodging. Just as I got there I saw in the distance the woman called Carol coming along the cliff path. She was hurrying. Against the gray of the rocks she looked like some poisonous scarlet flower. Her hat was the color of blood . . .

"I shook myself. Really, I had blood on the brain.

"Later I heard the sound of her car. I wondered if she too was going to Penrithar; but she took the road to the left, in the opposite direction. I watched the car crawl up the hill and disappear, and I breathed somehow more easily. Rathole seemed its quiet sleepy self once more."

"If that is all," said Raymond West as Joyce came to a stop, "I will give my verdict at once. Indigestion—spots before the eyes after meals."

"It isn't all," said Joyce. "You have got to hear the sequel. I read it in the paper two days later under the heading of 'Sea Bathing Fatality.'

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"It told how Mrs. Dacre, the wife of Captain Denis Dacre, was unfortunately drowned at Landeer Cove, just a little farther along the coast. She and her husband were staying at the time at the hotel there, and had planned to go bathing, but a cold wind sprang up.

"Captain Dacre had declared it was too cold, so he and some other people in the hotel had gone off to the golf links near by. Mrs. Dacre, however, had said it was not too cold for her and she went off alone down to the cove.

"As she didn't return, her husband became alarmed and in company with his friends went down to the beach. They found her clothes lying beside a rock, but no trace of the unfortunate lady. Her body was not found until nearly a week later when it was washed ashore at a point some distance down the coast.

"There was a bad blow on her head which had occurred before death, and the theory was that she must have dived into the sea and hit her head on a rock. As far as I could make out, her death would have occurred just twenty-four hours after I saw the bloodstains."

"I protest," said Sir Henry. "This is not a problem—this is a ghost story. Miss Lemprière is evidently a medium."

Mr. Petherick gave his usual cough.

"One point strikes me," he said. "That blow on the head. We must not, I think, exclude the possibility of foul play. But I do not see that we have any data to go upon. Miss Lemprière's hallucination, or vision, is interesting, certainly, but I do not see clearly the point on which she wishes us to pronounce."

"Indigestion and coincidence," said Raymond, "and anyway you can't be sure that they were the same people. Besides, the curse, or whatever it was, would only apply to actual inhabitants of Rathole."

"I feel," said Sir Henry, "that the sinister seafaring man has something to do with this tale. But I agree with Mr. Petherick, Miss Lemprière gave us very little data."

Joyce turned to Dr. Pender who smilingly shook his head.

"It is a most interesting story," he said, "but I am afraid I agree with Sir Henry and Mr. Petherick that there is not enough data."

Joyce then looked curiously at Miss Marple, who smiled back at her.

"I, too, think you are just a little unfair, Joyce dear," she said. "Of course, it is different for me. I mean, we, being women, appreciate the point about clothes. I don't think it is a fair problem to put to a man. It must have meant a lot of rapid changing. What a wicked woman! And a still more wicked man."

Joyce stared at her.

"Aunt Jane," she said. "Miss Marple, I mean, I believe—I really believe you know the truth."

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"Well, dear," said Miss Marple, "it is much easier for me sitting here quietly than it was for you—and being an artist you are so susceptible to atmosphere, aren't you? Sitting here with one's knitting, one just sees the facts. Bloodstains dropped on the pavement from the bathing suit hanging above, and being a *red* bathing suit, of course, the criminals themselves did not realize it was bloodstained. Poor thing, poor young thing!"

"Excuse me, Miss Marple," said Sir Henry, "but do you know that I am entirely in the dark still. You and Miss Lemprière seem to know what you are talking about, but we mere men are still in utter darkness."

"I will tell you the end of the story now," said Joyce. "It was a year later. I was at a little east coast seaside resort, and I was sketching, when suddenly I had that queer feeling one has of something having happened before.

"There were two people, a man and a woman, on the pavement in front of me, and they were greeting a third person, a woman dressed in a scarlet poinsettia chintz dress. 'Carol, by all that is wonderful! Fancy meeting you after all these years. You don't know my wife? Joan, this is an old friend of mine, Miss Harding.'

"I recognized the man at once. It was the same Denis I had seen at Rathole. The wife was different—that is, she was a Joan instead of a Margery; but she was the same type, young and rather dowdy and very inconspicuous. I thought for a minute I was going mad. They began to talk of going bathing.

"Well, I will tell you what I did. I marched straight then and there to the police station. I thought they would probably think I was off my head, but I didn't care. And as it happened everything was quite all right.

"There was a man from Scotland Yard there, and he had come down just about this very thing. It seems—oh, it's horrible to talk about—that the police had got suspicious of Denis Dacre. That wasn't his real name—he took different names on different occasions. He got to know girls—usually quiet inconspicuous girls without many relatives or friends. He married them and insured their lives for large sums and then—oh, it's horrible!

"The woman called Carol was his real wife, and they always carried out the same plan. That is really how they came to catch him. The insurance companies became suspicious. He would come to some quiet seaside place with his new wife, then the other woman would turn up and they would all go bathing together. Then the wife would be murdered and Carol would put on her clothes and go back in the boat with him.

"Then they would leave the place, wherever it was, after inquir-

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ing for the supposed Carol and when they got outside the village Carol would hastily change back into her own flamboyant clothes and her vivid make-up and would go back there and drive off in her own car.

"They would find out which way the current was flowing and the supposed death would take place at the next bathing place along the coast that way. Carol would play the part of the wife and would go down to some lonely beach and would leave the wife's clothes there by a rock and depart in her flowery chintz dress to wait quietly until her husband could rejoin her."

"I suppose when they killed poor Margery some of the blood must have spurted over Carol's bathing suit, and being a red one they didn't notice it, as Miss Marple says. But when they hung it over the balcony it dripped. Ugh!" she gave a shiver. "I can see it still."

"Of course," said Sir Henry, "I remember very well now. Davis was the man's real name. It had quite slipped my memory that one of his many aliases was Dacre. They were an extraordinarily cunning pair. It always seemed so amazing to me that no one spotted the change of identity. I suppose, as Miss Marple says, clothes are more easily identified than faces; but it was a very clever scheme, for although we suspected Davis it was not easy to bring the crime home to him as he always seemed to have an unimpeachable alibi."

"Aunt Jane," said Raymond, looking at her curiously, "how do you do it? You have lived such a peaceful life and yet nothing seems to surprise you."

"I always find one thing very like another in this world," said Miss Marple. "There was Mrs. Green, you know, she buried five children—and every one of them insured. Well, naturally, one began to get suspicious."

She shook her head.

"There is a great deal of wickedness in village life. I hope you dear young people will never realize how very wicked the world is."

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THE ADVENTURE OF THE SPECTACLED BAND

by ROBERT L. FISH

BETWEEN THE YEARS '55 AND '57 the genius of my friend Mr. Schlock Homes came, in my estimation, to its highest fruition. The early struggle for recognition was long past, and his reputation now extended to many countries beyond England. His fine work in America during the war years led to the capture of the largest receiver of stolen black-market war supplies, a case I find listed in my notes under the title of The Adventure of the Barbed-Wire Fence. In France he had been of signal service to the Parisian police in apprehending the gang known as The Kidnapping Cabbies, a case which was widely publicized as The Adventure of the Taxi-Driver's Métier.

But his work was not all abroad, for in England his efforts had often saved the face of Scotland Yard, and earned him the gratitude of his government. In going over my notes for these years, I find it difficult to select any single case as being representative of his mental alertness during this period, but possibly the one which best illustrates his extreme ability to see past the obvious to the hidden subtlety beyond is the one which I find annotated under the title of The Adventure of the Spectacled Band.

It was in the early winter of '56 that I returned one afternoon to our rooms at 221B Bagel Street. I had had a hard day, and I found myself quite exhausted as I let myself into our quarters. Homes was napping on the couch near the window, and I did not disturb him, knowing that he had been working quite hard of late on a new monograph covering a study of alcohol fractionation.

It was a gray day, with dark clouds heavy with their burden of snow, and I felt restless in the shadowy room. I had puttered about for some minutes when suddenly I heard the voice of my friend behind me.

"You are quite right, Watney," he chuckled. "Conscience is indeed a hard taskmaster."

"It most certainly is," I retorted with a touch of asperity; and then I stopped in amazement. "Homes! You have done it again! You have read my mind!"

"It was really not too difficult," said he with a smile, swinging his long legs to the floor and turning

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up the lamp. "I have been watching you since you entered the room. After removing your overcoat, you went immediately to the sideboard, from whence you removed a bottle of vodka and poured a generous portion into a glass. At that moment you glanced at your pocket-watch, and a look of remembrance cast itself over your features. It was only last evening, as I recall, that you were lecturing me on the dangers involved in drinking before the hour of five, and promising that you would abstain from an earlier tot if I agreed to join you in this forbearance.

"Following this, you glanced surreptitiously in my direction, and then obviously made up your mind, for I saw you adjust the stem of your watch. You then moved to the clock on the mantlepiece and advanced the hands fifteen minutes. When this was accomplished, you returned to your glass, but just as you were about to taste it, you shook your head sadly and poured it back into the bottle. It was at that point I observed that conscience was a hard taskmaster."

"An admirable reconstruction, Homes!" I replied in awe. "Actually, I had set my pocket-watch with the mantle-clock this morning, and only in the course of passing Big Ben to-day did I note that I was fifteen minutes slow, and I corrected my watch accordingly. I returned home at precisely five, and began to mix myself a vodka martini when I remembered that our timepiece was incorrect. I verified my watch, winding it as I did so, and then proceeded to correct the mantle-clock. When I returned to the business of making my martini, I thought that under the present political situation, my choice of liquor might have an erroneous interpretation placed upon it; and my conscience did indeed bother me when I recalled our brave lads at Balaclava and myself about to partake of vodka! I therefore poured it back into the bottle and was about to open the scotch when you spoke."

"The important thing," replied Homes with a twinkle, "is not so much the process as the result. Now that we have determined both the correct hour and drink, I suggest we waste no more time. A long drink for me, if you please, Watney, while I show you a curious message which reached me this afternoon."

He flung a telegraph form across to me and I paused to read it carefully. "Mr. Homes," it read; "I should like to visit you at six to-day to beg your opinion regarding the strange activities of the Miopic Mountaineers;" and it was simply signed Jabers Willson.

"The Miopic Mountaineers?" I asked in bewilderment. "Pray, who might they be?"

"I have no idea," replied Homes, chuckling genially; "but the phrase, you must admit, is intriguing!

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However, I imagine that we are soon to know, for here, unless I am much mistaken, is our mysterious visitor now."

The door was opened and our page ushered in a short, stocky man who accepted my offer of a whiskey, and after seating himself opposite us, began at once to speak.

"Mr. Homes," he said, twisting his whiskey glass nervously in his big hands, "I do not know if, in fact, I have any real basis for this visit, but now that I am here and you have been kind enough to give me your attention, I might as well tell you my story.

"I am a wholesale druggist by trade, and I specialize in the import and sale of narcotics to hospitals and medical men in private practice. At one time my business gave me a very fair profit, but since the recent development of the modern synthetic anesthetics, the demand for my products has steadily dropped, until today it appears that my large stocks of heroin, cocaine, and opium may actually result in a huge loss to me. With business so poor, I had no use for my main warehouse in Cheapside, and I therefore decided to lease it as a means of augmenting my greatly reduced income.

"You can well imagine my delight, therefore, when I was recently approached by a Mr. Murphey, who offered me a rental for my premises which was far beyond my wildest expectations."

Homes, who had been listening to this tale in complete engrossment, raised a hand in interruption. "What did you plan to do with your stocks of medical supplies?" he asked, his keen eyes watching Mr. Willson closely. "Did Mr. Murphey insist that you remove those to allow him the full facility of the space?"

"On the contrary, Mr. Homes," the stocky man replied earnestly. "Mr. Murphey was most co-operative, and said that he would have no objection whatsoever to my storing them on the premises. I offered to remove them to another location, but Mr. Murphey would not hear of my being put to this inconvenience. I have a reinforced concrete vault in the basement which I have used from time to time for the storage of old papers and receipts, and I therefore placed my stocks of narcotics in this vault. Mr. Murphey offered to take charge of the keys, but after all, there are limits to the favours one can ask of a tenant, even the best-natured, and as you can imagine I did not wish to lose this opportunity to rent the space at his high figure. Despite Mr. Murphey's kind-hearted insistence, I refused to burden him with the responsibility, and he finally accepted my refusal in the spirit in which it was offered. With this part of the business resolved, we quickly signed the papers, and I left him in possession of the warehouse."

"It appears to me that you have

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made a good contract," remarked Homes, leaning back in his chair. "Pray tell me why you now feel you have cause to doubt it?"

"Well, Mr. Homes," replied our visitor unhappily, "As I said before, I am not sure that I do have cause to doubt it. However, allow me to continue with my story, for subsequent events have been strange indeed.

"Yesterday I had occasion to visit Cheapside, and being near the warehouse, I thought I would drop in on Mr. Murphey and see if there was anything I might do as his landlord. Imagine my surprise when, as I neared the building, I heard the raucous sound of music coming from the interior—music referred to, I believe, as hillbilly. Upon entering, I found Mr. Murphey and three or four others seated near the basement steps, playing various loud instruments, and all wearing heavy, dark glasses and dirty overalls. Mr. Murphey left his group to speak with me, and he seemed quite upset by my visit.

"I asked him in some amazement if he had paid me the high rental just to have a rehearsal hall for his musicians, and he seemed to think for a while before answering. He finally responded by saying that he and his friends were all quite wealthy and as a philanthropic gesture, they had decided to form a club for underprivileged adults. Since they were also all amateur musicians, they planned to provide the music for the members themselves. Seeing me stare at the heavy glasses and dirty overalls, he laughed gaily and said they were not as young as they had been, and since they all wore glasses they had, in a moment of humour, decided to call themselves Murphey's Miopic Mountaineers, and to dress accordingly."

Homes smiled grimly as the name in the telegram came into the conversation. "When you first met Mr. Murphey, was he wearing glasses?" he enquired. "Or did he appear to require them?"

"No, Mr. Homes," said our visitor. "On the contrary. I know that people with poor eyesight usually have large pupils, but Mr. Murphey's pupils were extremely tiny, almost pinpoints, which led me to believe that his eyesight was even better than normal. Well, after returning home, I thought over my strange encounter at the warehouse, and felt extremely odd about it. I therefore determined to ask the advice of someone more familiar with these matters than myself, and for this reason requested an interview with you."

Homes arose and began pacing the floor in quick strides, rubbing his thin, strong hands together, for we had allowed the fire to burn down and the room had become quite chilly.

"You did the right thing, Mr. Willson," he said, his eyes gleaming. "I find the facts you have

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given me quite unusual, and it seems possible that Mr. Murphey and his musicians are planning some nefarious action. It is too late to-day for further investigation, but be assured that to-morrow I shall devote my full time to its solution. Tell me, is there any point from which the interior of this warehouse can be observed in secrecy?"

"There is a skylight which can be reached from the next building."

"Fine! If you would care to leave your address with Doctor Watney, as well as directions for locating this building in Cheapside, I hope to be in touch with you quite shortly with the answer to this most interesting problem."

For some time after Mr. Willson had been ushered out, Homes sat before the fire, his eyes closed and his fingers tented in that pose I knew indicated deep concentration. Finally he opened his eyes and sprang to his feet.

"Well, Watney," he said briskly, "there is nothing to do on this case until to-morrow, so I believe I shall spend the evening in further work on the fractionation of alcohol. Would you please hand me that flask at your side?"

"But which flask, Homes?" I asked, viewing the many bottles in confusion.

He leaned over and extracted one from beneath my eyes, frowning a bit. "By this time, Watney," he remarked in a slightly irritated voice, "you should know my methyls!"

The following morning, shortly after ten o'clock, found us standing precariously on the roof of the building in Cheapside, watching a very strange performance through the dirty skylight window.

Below we could see an unfurnished room, empty except for four men dressed as Mr. Willson had described, who were busily playing loud music at the far end of the room. From time to time one would drop his instrument and disappear down the cellar steps, to be replaced by another who appeared from the same place.

Suddenly Homes gripped my arm fiercely.

"Watney!" he ejaculated, his voice trembling with excitement. "Note the man who has just entered and taken his place at the front of the band—the one with red hair! This is no Mr. Murphey; that is Professor Marty, the most dangerous criminal in all London!"

"But Homes," I cried in dismay, "are you positive?"

"There can be no doubt! He is the only man in all England who plays the Burmese nose-flute left-handed! Come, Watney, there is work to be done! I fear that if the Professor is involved in this scheme, we have indeed tackled opponents worthy of our mettle!"

Tugging my arm, he led me from the roof to the stairway leading downward. Once in the street, he paused and considered the neighborhood carefully. The warehouse

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was located in the middle of the block, and was quite long and narrow. The shuttered façade fronted on a narrow street, while the back wall loomed over Cheapside Boulevard, a heavily travelled artery.

Walking rapidly, Homes circled the block several times, and then slowly began to widen the circle of his investigation until we had covered four or five city squares in all directions.

The area was largely commercial, with many office buildings and banks alternating with one another to crowd the area. After seriously contemplating the buildings that faced the various streets along our route, Homes once again patiently retraced his steps, but his attention was now focussed upon the pavements of the streets over which we strode.

Completely mystified, I followed upon his heels, but in all truth, I could see nothing out of the ordinary in the roadway he was studying so carefully. Finally he straightened his back and turned to me in great satisfaction.

"It is as I had imagined," he remarked thoughtfully. "The greatest problem, of necessity, had to be ventilation, but in solving this problem they were forced to disclose their whereabouts." At the stupefaction of my expression he burst into laughter. "No, Watney," he chuckled. "I was not attempting to be mysterious, but only thinking aloud. I suggest that we repair to some restaurant in the vicinity for lunch, while I explain to you my theory of this odd case."

Once we had been seated in a corner booth and the waiter had retired with our order, Homes leaned over the table and began to speak with that forceful manner which I knew meant he had seen light in this most puzzling problem.

"Let us take things in their order," said he. "It is obvious to the most dense that where Professor Marty is involved, some vicious plot against the public welfare is being concocted. I had already viewed with great doubt this so-called Mr. Murphey as soon as Mr. Willson told me he had elected to call his group the Miopic Mountaineers, for you must admit the name alone is highly suspicious."

"Suspicious in what way?"

"Why do they not call themselves the Four-Eyed Four?" replied my friend sardonically. "Or the Fibromyosis Five? Or the Sarcoma Six? Or the Staphyloma Seven? Or the Epicanthic Eight? No, no, Watney! The common practice of musical organizations is to include their *number* in their name! Certainly you have heard of 'City' Pound and his Twenty Shillings? Or Cesar Franc and his Ten Centimes? What possible conclusion can we come to, therefore, when the Professor purposely *omits* the number involved in his group? *Only that he wishes to keep this number a secret!*"

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"But for what possible reason, Homes?" I cried.

"There can be but one: so that when visitors come into the warehouse they are unable to discern that the group is not intact. In this fashion, the Professor is able to maintain a group engaged in *other* activities without anyone being the wiser!

"Think, Watney! In addition to avoiding the number involved, their name also cleverly justifies the use of both dirty overalls and dark glasses. Yet we have Mr. Willson's word that Mr. 'Murphey' has excellent eyesight, and from the poor illumination in the warehouse we can assume that his companions are equally well endowed with fine vision. Why, then, the disguise? It is true that these glasses hide the face and make identification difficult—yet the Professor made no attempt to avoid recognition when he first approached Mr. Willson. The answer is simplicity itself, Watney. *It is not a disguise at all*—the spectacles are simply safety glasses used to protect the eyes against welding flashes or dirt-chips, and the overalls are simply overalls, and nothing more!

"And now, Watney, we begin to see the reason for all this imposture! Did you happen to note during our recent excursion that within the immediate area of this ware house there are a total of sixty-three banking houses? I am positive that the Professor selected Mr. Willson's warehouse for its proximity to these banks, and the loud music is merely to cover the sound of their digging! Each day, Watney, they are enlarging some tunnelling system to reach the underground vaults of these banks!"

I stared at Homes in astonished admiration. Only a mind as sharp as his could have seen the subterfuge behind the Professor's devilish scheme, and properly arrived at the true solution! "But Homes," I said, recalling the beginning of our discourse, "what did you mean when you said the problem of necessity had to be ventilation?"

"Just that, Watney! It is obvious that a tunnel of the size required to connect all these banking establishments with their working base at the warehouse would require ventilation. Ventilation shafts, of necessity, must come at least to street level, where they are visible. In our stroll about the neighbourhood this morning, I carefully noted all possible air-vent outlets, and I am positive I have properly identified the ones they have installed.

"After midnight, the law requires the abatement of loud noises, including music, and they must perforce stop working on the tunnel at that hour. If my theory is correct, we can gain entrance to this tunnel by means of one of these air-shafts."

"But Homes," I admonished, "should we not inform the police?"

"It would be without purpose:

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the police cannot act before the fact, and their only recourse would be to place a watch over each bank vault in order to catch the miscreants in the act. We, being under no such mundane compulsion, can abolish the entire plot before it becomes operative, and thus save the police much work!

"Well, Watney, there seems to be little more to be done until the early hours of morning. I suggest we return to Bagel Street where I can pursue my researches until that time. It will also be necessary for me to obtain certain materials to take with us, for I shall foil this foul scheme at all cost!"

It was after midnight when we finally left our quarters. Homes carried a small black bag with great care, and nestled it cautiously between his long legs as our hansom rattled through deserted streets across the great city. We descended a few hundred feet from the warehouse, and Homes waited patiently until the cab had disappeared into the darkness before turning into Cheapside Boulevard and walking purposefully to a perforated manhole cover set into the pavement.

"Quickly, Watney!" he said, straining at the heavy iron lid. "It should be one of these!"

Without a word I knelt at his side and aided him in wrestling the awkward metal ring free from its cumbersome base. A steel ladder disappeared into the murky darkness below, and with a quick glance in all directions to ensure our privacy, Homes descended rapidly.

I followed with caution, feeling my way into the blackness rung by rung, until I felt my companion's hand on my ankle, guiding my feet to the solid earth at the bottom. I could hear Homes's quick breathing, and his fumbling at the catch of the black bag. A moment later he had produced a bull's-eye lantern and was sweeping the shaft with a steady beam of light. Despite my faith in my friend's remarkable analytical reasoning power, I was forced to catch my breath in admiration, for we were in a long tunnel that curved out of sight in both directions!

"Homes!" I whispered. "You were completely correct! This tunnel is of a size that could easily reach all the banking establishments within this area!"

"And we have come none too soon, Watney!" he replied in a low, firm voice. "Note the finished state of their work—it is typical of the Professor to be fastidious in the details of his vile schemes. It is obvious that he must be almost ready for his coup! Note the completeness of their installations—they have even provided for wagons to speed the work of looting the vaults! The only thing they failed to take into account was the existence of Schlock Homes, and this oversight shall cost them dearly! Quickly, Watney, my black bag!"

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I held the bull's-eye lantern while Homes neatly extracted two long sticks of explosive and attached them firmly to one of the wagons. As I watched in fascination, he affixed a fuse to their caps and leading it some distance away, knelt and lighted the end.

"Away, Watney!" he whispered excitedly. "This fuse should take no more than two hours at the most to reach the charge, and I suggest we be far distant when that occurs!"

We quickly made our way back as we had come, and once at the foot of the ladder, Homes covered the lantern, plunging us into darkness. I rapidly mounted the metal rungs of the ladder, hearing the heavy breathing of my friend behind me.

Within minutes we had reset the manhole cover firmly on its base, and hurried up the deserted street to a cabstand around the corner. Less than ten minutes after Homes had lighted the fuse that was to end the Professor's nefarious plot to rob most of London's banks, we were settled back in a hansom and rapidly returning to Bagel Street.

Because of our late hours and strenuous activities, it was well after the stroke of noon when we arose. Homes entered the breakfast room just as I was sitting down to a belated lunch, but knowing his interest in current affairs, I had opened the afternoon journal even before taking my first kipper, and had noted the headlines by the time he was seated.

"Good afternoon, Watney," said he, seating himself and reaching for the kipper-plate. "What news do you find in the journal which might prove to be of interest?"

"Well, Homes," I replied, scanning the paper closely. "The first article which I see says that it appears that the consumption of drugs is rapidly increasing in London of late."

"Is that so?" he said, exhibiting slight interest. "You might mention this fact to our Mr. Willson when you give him your account of our activities. If this is the case, it may well give him a market for his stock, and partially compensate him for the undoubted loss of a well-paying tenant. But I am not interested in the commercial news, Watney. Is there no crime which might claim our attention?

"Well, there is this, Homes," I replied, studying another article. "It says here that service on the Cheapside line of the London Underground Subway System was disrupted early this morning, and that the police feel that sabotage was undoubtedly involved."

"Sabotage!" cried Homes, leaning forward eagerly, his eyes flashing. "To my mind, Watney, sabotage—next to the stealing of coal—is the dirtiest of all crimes! I must offer my services to the authorities immediately! A telegram to Scotland Yard, if you please, Watney!"

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	JAMES HOLDING
TITLE:	*The Norwegian Apple Mystery*
TYPE:	A Problem in Deduction
DETECTIVES:	Leroy and Danforth ("Leroy King")
LOCALE:	Aboard the cruise ship, *Valhalla*
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*A story that particularly appealed to your Editors (for reasons that will become quite evident), but also a story that we honestly believe will appeal to* all *readers . . .*

TWO HOURS AFTER THE STEWARDess found Angela Cameron lying dead in her bed in Cabin A-12, the news was all over the ship. That was pretty good going, even allowing for the fact that rumor is commonly conceded to fly faster on a ship at sea than anywhere else.

Most of the cruise passengers, of course, after forty-five days afloat, were eager for something besides shore excursions and shopping triumphs to gossip about; they seized this tidbit avidly, chewed it over, and passed it on to their neighbors with unusual celerity. Sunning themselves idly in the gaily striped deck chairs of the Norwegian cruise ship *Valhalla* as she plowed through the South China Sea toward Hong Kong, they chattered about Miss Cameron's death like a flock of hungry sparrows that suddenly discovers a slice of bread on the snow.

Despite the animation with which the passengers discussed the event, however, a general feeling of regret and even sadness spread with the news. For Angela Cameron had not only been vivacious, intelligent, pretty, and liberally endowed with sex appeal, she had actually been as well liked by the women passengers as by the men —which is saying a great deal for an attractive young woman traveling alone on a luxury cruise around the world.

The Danforths and the Leroys

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were sitting in the after Promenade Bar, having a pre-luncheon gimlet, when they were first apprised of the fact that there had been a death on board. As the bar steward leaned forward to deposit a dish of salted nuts on their table, he said to King Danforth in a solemn undertone, "Too bad about Miss Cameron, sir."

Helen Leroy, who was blonde, vital, and fast off the mark, spoke up before Danforth could say anything. "Miss Cameron?" she asked of the steward. "What about her, Eric?"

"I'm sorry, Madam," the Norwegian bar steward said in his stiff English, "I thought you might have heard. Miss Cameron is dead. Edith, her stewardess, found her this morning. She died while reading in bed."

"Oh, dear, what a shame!" Carol Danforth said with instant sympathy. "She was such a lovely person. And how awful for Edith. What was it, Eric? Did Miss Cameron have a heart attack?"

"No, Madam," Eric said. "She choked to death on a bite of apple."

King Danforth and Martin Leroy exchanged glances. Death was no stranger to them. Indeed, they made a living from it. Under the pseudonym of Leroy King, the two men operated with fabulous success as a writing team specializing in stories of murder, mystery, and crime. Several dozen best-selling novels, scores of short stories, numerous television and movie scripts about murder had made them world-famous. And here, on a cruise with their wives to get away from it all, the bar steward was saying—it might well have leaped directly from the page of one of their own mysteries—"No, Madam. She choked to death on a bite of apple."

Pressed by Helen and Carol, Eric gave them details. It was obvious that the story had swept through the ship's crew like a brushfire in the Hollywood hills. Miss Cameron usually had breakfast in her cabin. So Edith, her stewardess, unless warned away by a "Do Not Disturb" sign on the door of A-12, would normally enter Miss Cameron's cabin at ten o'clock, using her passkey, wake the lady, and take her breakfast order.

This morning, however, Miss Cameron had not awakened, nor did she need breakfast. Edith had found her clad in her nightgown, propped up against the pillows on her bed, a book fallen from one hand and a half-eaten apple from the other, her face dreadfully discolored and distorted, and her flesh beginning to turn cold. The reading lamp was still burning.

Although Miss Cameron was quite obviously past help, Edith had put through a hurry call for the ship's doctor. He was able only to confirm that poor Miss Cameron was indeed dead, and to point out the cause: a large fragment of the

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apple she had been eating was wedged tightly in her throat.

When the bar steward left them to their gimlets, Danforth wriggled his lanky frame in his chair, ran a hand over his crew cut, and said a trifle sheepishly, "I am not callous and unfeeling about things like this. But I couldn't help feeling that 'she choked to death on a bite of apple' would fit very well into one of our stories, Mart."

"I had the same thought," Leroy said, grinning. His dark eyes, short wide face, and compact body suggested Indian impassivity, but he denied it with every word and movement. "It was almost like being home again, working on a plot."

"Whoa!" Helen Leroy said. "This a vacation, remember? No plotting, no murder gimmicks, no looking for criminals to fit into stories—that was the agreement. Right?"

"Right," Carol Danforth agreed emphatically. She was short and dark, like her husband's partner, with a brisk way of speaking. "So forget about it, boys. Miss Cameron died a perfectly natural accidental death—to coin a contradiction in terms. Let her alone."

"But what a starting point for a mystery!" Her husband's eyes kindled.

"The first thing we'd have to postulate," Martin picked him up instantly, "is that the girl did *not* die a perfectly natural accidental death, as Carol insists, but was murdered."

"Of course," Danforth said. "That's where the challenge lies. In figuring out how this perfectly natural accidental death could be made to appear that way by a murderer."

"And how he murdered her, and where, and why."

"Exactly."

"And who he was."

Their wives saw with resignation that the two incurable story plotters had the bit in their teeth and were not to be headed. So rather than nag, and mellowed, moreover, by the gimlets they were drinking, they sighed and entered into the discussion.

"Before you apply your keen analytical brains to the solving of this murder that doesn't exist," Carol Danforth said, "do you realize that there are approximately seven hundred and fifty *suspects* aboard this ship? Four hundred crew members and three hundred and fifty passengers? Isn't that a few too many for even two geniuses like you to sift successfully?"

"Not at all," her husband said. "Motive. Surely all those people wouldn't have a motive for killing an attractive girl like Miss Cameron?"

"Not likely," Leroy agreed, "unless everybody on board found out Miss Cameron was a typhoid carrier, or fatally radioactive, or something like that."

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Danforth shook his head. "Far-fetched. Very few people would commit murder as a public service, even under such circumstances. No, it's got to be something more credible than that."

Helen Leroy said, "Well, I'm no writer, thank goodness, but if you want to be logical about it, *I'd* suggest that for one minute of respectful silence you turn your brilliant deductive powers on Miss Cameron's exceptionally fine figure."

King Danforth patted her hand and leaned back to sip at his gimlet thoughtfully. "Now we're getting somewhere, my sweet. A sex killing. That's more like it. This girl was very beautiful and, if you'll pardon a vulgarism, sensationally stacked. Suppose somebody made a pass at her, was ruthlessly repulsed, and killed her out of sexual frustration?"

"Hear, hear," Helen Leroy said. She was watching through the bar window the lazily lifting swells of blue sea that carried small antimacassars of lacy foam on their crests. "I'm getting bored with all the supposing. Doesn't that water look good enough to swim in?"

"Speaking of swimming," Danforth murmured, "the girl, Miss Cameron, was quite a fine swimmer herself. I have seen her churning back and forth in the ship's indoor swimming pool on occasion."

"In a bathing suit?" Leroy inquired.

"Of course."

"Then you're in a position to speak with authority on her figure, King. Was it enough to make a man commit murder?"

"It was," Danforth said appreciatively.

"This is the first I knew you'd been sneaking down to the pool to watch Angela Cameron do the Australian crawl!" Carol Danforth said sharply. "Luring husbands to swimming pools! No wonder she got herself murdered!"

"If you will be guided by my long experience as a plotter," Martin Leroy said hastily, "let us for the moment drop the motive and settle a few questions about method. She choked on an apple, remember."

"Easy," Danforth replied. "She was strangled first. The bite of apple was merely shoved down her throat by her murderer and wedged there for the doctor to find —so he would think exactly what he did think."

"Ah, but the bar steward said nothing about marks on the lady's throat that might indicate a manual strangling."

"The murderer didn't choke her with his hands. He garroted her."

"Impossible. A garrote cord would leave a plainly visible mark."

"Who said anything about a cord? The murderer used something soft to choke her—like a bed sheet or a bath towel."

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"A bed sheet!" Helen Leroy laughed. "You men!"

"That would narrow down the suspects, though," Leroy grinned. "It ought to eliminate all the women aboard."

"Be serious," Danforth said with a frown. "This is a problem levity will not solve."

"All right. Where are we? We've got a resisting Miss Cameron strangled by a murderer, hypothetically male, using, say, a bath towel. Where do we go from there?"

"To lunch," Carol Danforth said grimly. "I'm starved."

"Don't anybody order an apple for dessert," Danforth said.

Their table was in the *Valhalla's* forward dining room, familiarly called the Runic Room. As they seated themselves for luncheon, they could tell from the buzz of conversation enlivening the usually sedate dining saloon that Miss Cameron's death was being discussed all about them. But adhering to their long-established rule that no business be discussed during meals—long-established by the wives—the Danforths and the Leroys talked about yesterday's shore trip to Bangkok, where they had been privileged to see the breath-taking temples, towers and *cheddis* of that holy city.

The cruise ship had anchored at dawn off the mouth of the Menam River, unable to enter because of the extensive sandbar that effectively blocks the entrance to ocean-going ships. A huge flat-bottomed barge, handled by Chinese seamen, had chugged majestically out to the *Valhalla* from shore, taken aboard almost all the *Valhalla's* passengers, ferried them triumphantly over the sandbar, and three hours later disembarked them at the wharves of Bangkok, twenty-five miles up the river. The full day of sightseeing in 100-degree heat that ensued had been wearying, but worth it, they all agreed. It had been midnight when they climbed exhausted into their beds.

"That trip was rough enough to kill any but a hardened tourist," Leroy said. "I've never seen Helen so pooped as last night when we got back to the ship."

At this point Danforth broke their rule. He had been thinking about Miss Cameron reading in bed. "Everybody who took that trip to Bangkok was completely beat last night," he said. "And that makes me think Miss Cameron wouldn't have been reading in bed after she got back on the ship. She'd have been sleeping, brother—worn out like the rest of us."

"So?"

"So she must have been reading in her bunk this *morning*. Woke up early, say, couldn't get back to sleep, picked up a book, turned on her reading light, felt the pangs of hunger stir, reached for an apple, and took a bite. How's that?"

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"That's fine, Monsieur Dupin, but where does it get us?" Leroy was saying when Jackson Powell, Thos. Cook's Shore Excursion Manager on the ship, came by their table on his way out of the dining room. He stopped for a moment.

"It's too bad about Miss Cameron, isn't it?" he asked. "Especially when she missed seeing Bangkok. She thought that would be the high spot of the cruise for her."

"What do you mean, she missed it?" Danforth exclaimed. "Wasn't she ashore yesterday with the rest of us?"

Powell shook his head. "She had a reservation for the shore trip, but she didn't go. I checked the list myself, and she wasn't there." He gazed morosely at the goat's cheese Leroy was applying to a cracker. "She'll never see Bangkok now," he said profoundly and walked away.

When they left the Runic Room, Leroy grinned self-consciously. "Go on up to our regular deck chairs, will you? I'll join you on the Sun Deck."

"Where are you going, Martin?" Helen Leroy demanded.

"Got a small errand to attend to in the aft dining room."

"That's where Miss Cameron's table was," his wife said. "You can't fool me. Why don't you forget it, darling?"

"Just a notion I want to ask about. See you in the sun, kids." And Leroy took off.'

When he dropped into his chair on the Sun Deck five minutes later, Leroy was beaming. "I talked to her table steward. She didn't show up for any of her meals yesterday—or for dinner the night before!"

"Probably ate in her cabin," Carol Danforth said. "Can't we talk about *anything* else?"

But Danforth was muttering, "There's a way to find out." He left them, hurried down the starboard Sun Deck corridor to the elevator, and got off at A-deck; he and Carol occupied stateroom A-20. He went to his cabin, let himself in, and rang for Edith, the stewardess.

She knocked on the door a few seconds later. "Come in, Edith," he said. She was a lovely statuesque Norwegian girl with auburn hair and an incredible snow-and-roses complexion. Her eyes were a bit puffy and red, Danforth noticed. "Sorry about Miss Cameron," he said sympathetically. "It must have been hard for you, finding her like that."

"It was not good," Edith said, making the "good" sound like "goot."

"Tell me, Edith. I hear Miss Cameron was not on the shore trip to Bangkok yesterday with us. And she didn't eat in the dining room yesterday or the night before. Was she in her cabin all that time?"

The stewardess looked puzzled. "There is the 'Do Not Disturb' sign on her door all yesterday," she said,

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"and evening before. So I do not disturb her for dinner, breakfast, or luncheon. That is how I am told, when there is the sign 'Do not Disturb.' Let her alone, yes?"

He raised his eyebrows. "So she stayed in her cabin all that time, even when she was supposed to be on a shore excursion to Bangkok?"

"Not all the time," Edith corrected. "At five o'clock in the afternoon, yesterday, I use my key and enter Miss Cameron's cabin. I am worried. I have not seen her since the afternoon before yesterday."

"And?"

"She is not in A-12. Nobody is there."

"Oh. And the bed, was it made up? Had it been slept in?"

"It is made up, although I have not made it up since morning before yesterday."

Danforth said, "She probably made it up herself yesterday. Slept so late she hated to bother you, maybe. Was her door locked when you went in yesterday?"

She nodded.

"And how about this morning when you—er—discovered her?"

"Not locked," the young stewardess said, obviously picturing in her memory how it had been. "Her door key is on the dressing table beside the fruit tray."

"And was the 'Do Not Disturb' sign gone from her door?"

"Yes."

"Did you touch her when you found her this morning?"

"Yes. Her arm when I shake her." Edith shuddered. "She is getting—she is getting . . ."

"Cold?"

Silently, she nodded.

"But still a little warm, too?"

"Still a little warm. But more colder. Colder than warm."

Danforth said, "Thanks, Edith. Mr. Leroy and I write stories about things like this, you know? We're always interested in how such things happen. And we liked Miss Cameron very much."

"She was nice," Edith said, and left quickly.

Helen, Carol, and Martin were waiting for Danforth in their Sun Deck chairs when he returned, but not with any noticeable eagerness, because all three of them had dropped off into the well-fed, sun-induced post-luncheon nap that overcame most of the passengers regularly every afternoon. King was hurt. "Hey!" he said loudly, sitting down in his deck chair.

They awoke with a simultaneous start.

Helen Leroy yawned. "You're back, King. Wish you'd stayed longer. I could have milked another half hour out of that nap."

"Listen—" Danforth began eagerly.

"Oh, shut up, darling," Carol Danforth said. "We're all exhausted. Go away somewhere else and plot your plans, or vice versa. Helen and I have had it."

"Not me!" said Leroy. "What's

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the good word from your recent investigation, King? You've been interviewing Edith, I assume."

"You assume right. Miss Cameron spent yesterday and the evening before in some mysterious limbo, Mart. She was not ashore in Bangkok. She was not in the dining room for any meals, as you yourself confirmed. And she was not in her cabin!"

"Not in her cabin?" his partner repeated, astonished.

"Edith says no. A 'Do Not Disturb' sign was up all day yesterday and the evening before. But Edith looked in at five yesterday. No Angela."

"What do you know!" Leroy breathed. "Now there's a nice complication."

"It's nice complications that make the yarn," Danforth said sententiously. "So where was she?"

"With the murderer," Leroy suggested. "Shacked up in *his* cabin while she repulsed his advances."

"Huh-uh. All the able-bodied men among the passengers were in Bangkok."

"The crew. It was obviously a member of the crew. *They* didn't go to Bangkok."

"True. They didn't."

They sat thinking in silence, watching the faint black stream of cinders from the *Valhalla's* single stack go streaming away to port in the light breeze. Then Danforth said calmly, as though there had been no hiatus since his last remark, "The girl was murdered the day *before* yesterday. That would explain everything."

"The day before yesterday!" Leroy protested. "Impossible! The bar steward distinctly told us that Angela Cameron was just getting cold when Edith found her this morning. *Beginning* to get cold, I believe Eric said. They don't stay warm for thirty-six hours, Mastermind!"

"Yes, that is a problem. In Edith's own words, Miss Cameron had still a little warm, but more colder."

Silence once more.

Leroy suddenly said, "The average rate of body-cooling is more or less one degree per hour, depending on the surrounding temperature and moisture."

Danforth looked at him respectfully. "You're quoting," he said. "But from what?"

"The Encyclopaedia Britannica, I think. Or is it our own *The Swedish Match Mystery?* I don't remember. But I read it somewhere."

"So where," Danforth, queried, "could a dead girl be stashed on this ship where the surrounding temperature and moisture might retard the cooling of her body?"

"The refrigerator," Helen Leroy said drowsily.

"Not the refrigerator, bright girl," her husband's partner denied. "That's where she is *now*. We want just the opposite effect."

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Leroy had a faraway look in his eyes. "Friends," he announced, "I believe I've come up with the answer."

"Which is? And don't be so darn smug!" his wife exhorted him.

"Why, the natural, the obvious, the only possible place."

Danforth said, "Don't tell me. Let me guess. The steam room down on D-deck beside the swimming pool."

"Bingo! The steam room, of course. Where else?"

"Of course!"

Again silence descended upon the plotters.

This one lasted longer. But eventually Danforth broke it. "Say. The steam room is right off the swimming pool, next to the massage room. Miss Cameron was a regular swimmer in the pool each afternoon. In that very revealing suit. Somebody down there fell for her, but hard. Right?"

"You ought to know," his wife said.

"Somebody who saw her in that suit so frequently that he simply couldn't go on resisting his baser impluses. So the day before yesterday . . ."

"Hold it, King, hold it." The interruption was Leroy's. "You keep trying to put the finger on somebody for this fictitious crime. I say we've got to work out how it *happened* first. Explain to me, if you please, the bit about the steam room. I've been in it. I've steamed myself like a soft shell clam with sinus trouble. I've lost six pounds in that room. But where could anybody hide a grown-up girl's body in that Spartan chamber?"

"Close your eyes, Mart," Danforth chortled. "Conjure up a picture of that steam room. It's got open framework wooden benches in it, like bleacher seats in a ball park, for the customers to sit or recline on while steaming themselves thin. Correct?"

"Correct."

"Now think about the space *behind* those benches."

"Got it."

"Do you see?"

Leroy opened his eyes. "You're right. There's a space behind the benches about a foot and a half wide, backed by the wall of the steam room. And the back wall is solid. A body dropped in there would be hidden."

"Exactly."

"Hidden from the customers, unless somebody happened to climb to the top row and look straight down the back."

"And the steam room wasn't used by more than a dozen people yesterday, remember. Most of us were ashore in Bangkok."

"Right!"

"So there's where the murderer kept Angela Cameron," Danforth said, "between the time he killed her and early this morning."

"When *did* he kill her, Swami?" Carol asked, in spite of herself.

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"The probabilities seem fairly clear. What time does the indoor pool close?"

"Six o'clock."

"And Miss Cameron liked to do her swimming late in the afternoon, as I observed. Therefore, she probably went for her usual swim about five thirty, day before yesterday. She swam until the pool closed. By then she was doubtless the only person left down there, aside from the staff. When she went into the ladies' dressing room to take off her wet suit and put on her robe—that's when it happened. The murderer, who had been waiting for just this opportunity, tried for his home run and got thrown out at first. That's when he killed her, to keep her from screaming the ship down or reporting him to the Captain."

Leroy picked it up. "And then he put her in the steam room. The intense heat and moisture in there retarded, as you so delicately phrased it, the cooling of her body until the killer could get it back up to her cabin early this morning."

"Just a moment." Danforth raised a magisterial hand. "Why would he want to *delay* having her body found for a whole day?"

"Sheer terror of discovery, I should think," Carol said, now in it all the way.

"Perhaps he hoped to obscure the time of her death by allowing the mad confusion of the Bangkok shore excursion to intervene," Helen said.

"There could have been any number of reasons. The important thing is," Leroy said, "the killer stashes Angela behind the steam room benches, then casually goes up to A-deck and drapes a 'Do Not Disturb' sign on her cabin door."

"He knows her cabin is A-12 from the tag on her door key."

"Yes. And he hangs out the sign to stall, to give him time to think, to plan."

"Check. But how does he get her body up to her cabin again, early this morning?"

"Maybe in a hamper of dirty towels from the swimming pool? The body covered up by laundry?"

"Perfect. He folds her body into a wheeled hamper, covers her with some soiled towels from the dressing rooms, and wheels her up to her cabin—pretending he's collecting laundry. And with no one stirring except crew members so early in the morning, he'd find it easy to wheel the cart right into her cabin at the proper moment. And out again, later."

"Not a very original method of body transport. But it could work."

"Of course it could work. Let's see, now. Edith said the door was locked yesterday afternoon when she went in and saw that Angela was missing. But it was not locked this morning when she discovered the body. What about that?" Danforth waited for suggestions.

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Helen came through. "She had her room key with her when she went down to swim, naturally. So the murderer simply used her own key to get into A-12 when he took the body back."

"Very good. And why wasn't A-12 locked this morning when Edith discovered the body?"

Leroy said, "Because the killer had no way of locking the door after him when he left her cabin! They're not snap locks. And he had to leave her key *inside* the room because that's where it would naturally be when Miss Cameron was in her room. He couldn't take a chance that a missing key might arouse suspicion."

"Not bad," Danforth said. "That could be it."

Leroy sighed wistfully. "We could make an interesting story out of this, King, if we gave it the proper treatment. I particularly like the bath towel touch. Victim strangled with bath towel, then concealed under same when wheeled to stateroom in laundry cart."

"And then," Danforth went on, ignoring him, "What happens? He's in her cabin now, with the body-laden cart. I say he dresses Miss Cameron in her nightie, puts her into bed, props her up, turns on the reading lamp, arranges a book near one hand, the apple near the other—and then scrams."

"Having first bitten a piece out of the apple and wedged it far down her throat." Leroy nodded. "I like it, King, I like it."

"So who's going to suspect murder? It's an accident. Anyway, the killer comes out of A-12 with his cart and goes about his normal business, which is obviously merely the taking of some soiled towels to the ship's laundry."

"The stairway down to the laundry is on A-deck, aft," Leroy said. "That fits."

"And poor Miss Cameron is found this morning at ten, dead in her bed, having choked to death on a bite of apple sometime during the night or early this morning. The victim of what my dear wife calls a perfectly natural accidental death." Danforth leaned back and lit a cigarette. "There we are. No holes in *that* fabric."

"But . . ." said Helen Leroy.

"Are there buts?" King Danforth asked, "Do you mean there are loose ends?"

"One," she said succinctly. "Who's the man who couldn't resist his baser impulses when he saw Miss Cameron in a bathing suit?"

Danforth laughed. "You do have a point there," he said. "What do you think, Mart?"

"I am at an extreme disadvantage in this area of speculation," Leroy said. "I am not a swimmer." He slanted a look at Danforth. "I am not even drawn to swimming pools by sensational chassis, either singular or plural. In fact, I have

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never been down to D-deck for anything except a steam bath and massage. But if I were to pick out a member of the crew who could have fallen for Miss Cameron's charms at the swimming pool and killed her when he was denied them, I am in favor of that Neanderthal blond Viking type with the rabbit's teeth who's employed to pull you out of the pool if you start to drown. Isn't his name Nils?"

"The very fellow I was thinking of," Danforth agreed. "And he'd have ready access to the towels, too."

"And the laundry cart," Helen Leroy said. "But I know Nils quite well. He's sweet."

"Perhaps your chassis is not sensational enough to arouse the beast in him," her husband started to say, but thought better of it.

"Well, children," Danforth said, "if fact were as strange as Leroy King's fiction, which it unfortunately ain't, that's the way poor Angela Cameron would have got hers."

"Face it," Leroy sighed. "Miss Cameron just had the bad luck to choke to death on her apple. And to be quite fair to Nils, the lad at the swimming pool, I'd say that if he went to an orthodontist and got those outboard teeth of his brought into line, he'd be better-looking, more appealing, and more gentle than either gentlemen in this present company."

"That," Carol Danforth said heartily, "is fact, not fiction!"

At dinner they were in high spirits and ordered a bottle of champagne. "To celebrate," Leroy said, "our solution of The Norwegian Apple Mystery."

They had stingers on the rocks in the ballroom after dinner, while playing Bingo games which were always won by other passengers. Then they danced until midnight to the excellent music of the all-Scandinavian jazz band.

And when they finally descended to their cabins on A-deck to turn in, they were pleasantly aware of the fact that despite its tragic result for one of their fellow-passengers, the day had been stimulating.

To get to their staterooms from the elevator, they had to pass the door of Cabin A-12, recently occupied by the late Miss Angela Cameron. As they approached it, the door to A-12 opened and Edith, their stewardess, stepped out into the corridor, carrying a fruit tray. She bobbed her auburn head at them and started to pass. Danforth put out his hand and restrained her.

"Hi, Edith," he said. "Something more happening in A-12?"

"No, Mr. Danforth," she said. "I am cleaning up Miss Cameron's stateroom, packing her things. To take off the ship with her when we arrive Hong Kong. It is now

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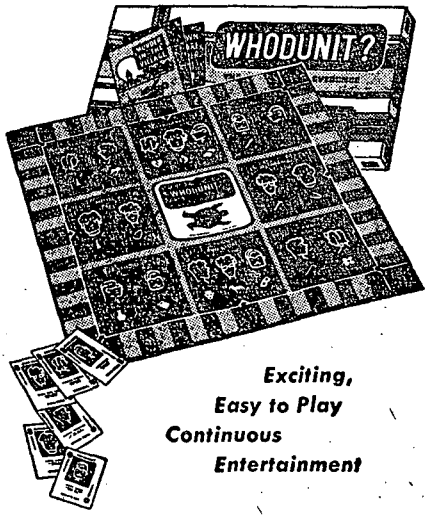

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all finished. Her parents radio to have her cremated in Hong Kong, and send ashes home on airplane."

"Poor thing," Helen Leroy said, suddenly feeling very guilty. But then she looked at the dish of fruit that Edith was taking from A-12 to dispose of in her service pantry.

Leroy was looking at it, too. He reached out and took an apple from the tray. "Is this the apple Miss Cameron was eating when she choked?"

Edith nodded.

"Look at that," Leroy whispered.

He held out the apple.

The flesh of the apple had turned brown where someone had taken a single large bite out of it.

The tooth marks showed clearly along the top edges of the bite. They could not possibly have been made by the small even teeth of Angela Cameron. Unmistakably they had been carved into the fruit by two very large, protruding front teeth.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **IRVIN S. COBB**

TITLE: ***The Bet on Miss Rainey***

TYPE: Riddle Story

LOCALE: New York City

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *The very first time Watsworth met the resourceful-Miss Rainey there was a "matching of wits"—which led quite naturally to "an intriguing, puzzling, and elusive riddle." Fair warning!*

THIS MORNING'S MAIL BROUGHT me an invitation for the Rainey-Watsworth marriage—one of those heavy, simple engraved invitations betokening that no expense has been spared in order to achieve that simplicity. So I'm sending a present. But first I'm writing this small narrative to tell how the romance started.

As romances go along our Eastern seaboard in these highly standardized, highly commercialized days, it was quite a little romance, I think. At any rate it is leading into a marriage between two very likable young persons and to me there is a feel of romance in almost any marriage anywhere. At best it's a prospect for the perpetuation of the species and at worst it's a gallant speculation on the part of two persons willing to take a sporting chance with the odds all against them.

Of course, anyone who undertakes in advance to prognosticate that a marriage will turn out happily is an incurable optimist, which is merely the politer way of saying he's an ass. But in this case I honestly believe there is a rainbow of hope across the arch of the future for the two persons chiefly concerned. If I am one to judge, they have a good deal in common.

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At any rate, the courtship has been swift and that frequently is a good sign—where it isn't too swift. I should say it was not more than four or five weeks ago when I heard they were going about together a good deal. Last week somebody told me the engagement had been announced, and that same evening I saw a formal notice of it in the papers.

And now today came the cards for the wedding and all—ceremony at St. Barnabas's on Long Island, reception to follow at the country-house of the bride's parents, couple to be at home after such-and-such a date at number so-and-so Park Avenue.

Yet it was less than three months ago when they met. I thought then something perhaps might come of it—it was so out of the ordinary. Not the meeting itself; that was in all regards conventional; but the sequel, the climax, if you prefer to put it that way. The dénouement was the unusual part.

These twain met and immediately there was a matching of wits and you have only to bear with me to the end of my brief chronicle to find out who won. In view of subsequent developments I am constrained to believe that the taking of the first trick was the beginning of everything for them.

We were having lunch with Bill Hale at his apartment—Watsworth and I; Macy Steers and Steers's fiancée, Miss Towsey, a nice friendly, fluttery, stereotyped little thing; and a Mrs. Somebody-or-other—I never did catch the name, but I gathered she was a grass-widow sowing for a new harvest in the uncertain fields of matrimony, with a special eye on Hale who, being a bachelor and wealthy, is naturally eligible although, I might add, an exceedingly wary bird.

It was after lunch that Jean Rainey dropped in to look at a certain picture Hale had picked up at an auction somewhere. For one, I was exceedingly glad to see her. To the calculating, canvassing, highly shellacked widow and the colorless Miss Towsey, she offered an agreeable contrast; she was so well-groomed, so good-looking, so smartly organized, mentally and physically. She radiated efficiency without appearing in the least degree conceited and that, let me tell you, is a rare enough combination in a woman—for that matter, in a man as well.

There was another reason why, so far as I was concerned, she was a welcome addition. We were faced with the prospect of killing an hour or two with no weapons handy for the killing operation. The movies had been suggested by Miss Towsey—vetoing thumbs down on that proposition came from both sides and one end of the table. Watsworth and I both voted against the idea of going to a matinee. Since I do most of my work in the morning, I often have my afternoons to spare

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but I rarely patronize a theater until after dark. Being at a matinee gives the average man who works for his living a self-conscious, almost an ashamed feeling as though he were where he had no business to be. I know I am constituted that way.

But after Jean Rainey arrived our group miraculously ceased to be disproportioned and just a bit discordant. It became an harmonious rounded-out thing, because she had brought to the company what before that it lacked—an indefinable sprightly sense of balance.

Watsworth is one of the most observant human beings I ever knew. He claims one of the chief joys in life is to be able to see the small important things which most people overlook. He isn't proud or boastful about this gift of his but, time and place suiting, he takes pleasure in exhibiting it. Besides he has a theory that the run of us should be educated to use our eyes more than we do use them.

Hale, as a thoughtful host wishful to provide entertainment for his guests, presently began drawing Watsworth out on his hobby. Watsworth rose to the lure like a famishing trout to a well-cast fly.

"Speaking of clothes," he presently said, although nobody had been speaking of them, "speaking of clothes, who knows what is the most inevitable, the most customary feature of the outer garments that civilized Anglo-Saxon mankind wears? What is it about a man's wardrobe which nobody particularly notices unless it's missing —and then nearly everybody does take prompt note of it?"

"His shoes," guessed Steers.

"His hat," guessed somebody else.

"I'm afraid you misunderstand," explained Watsworth. "A man who walked around the streets with his head uncovered or his feet bare would be regarded as an eccentric —he'd attract immediate attention because, by all our standards, he wasn't properly or completely dressed. No, what I mean is a practical, inevitable but not especially decorative detail of a man's ordinary attire. I'll tell you: it's not a pair of shoes, it's not a hat. It's a button."

"What button?" demanded Hale.

"The buttons on his coat, on his sleeves, on his waistcoat—any of them, all of them. There's a lot to the scientific study of buttons. Who among you can tell why it is that when a woman puts on a man's coat it always has a strange malformed look to it, even though it may fit her?"

Nobody could.

"Very simple," expounded Watsworth. "It's because invariably a man's coat buttons over from left to right and a woman's from right to left. Perhaps you didn't know that most stock-size buttons in their circumferences match with our common United States coins—

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dimes, cents, nickels, quarters, half dollars, dollars? Well, they do.

"Here, I'll make a little test: Hale, you'll do as a victim of the demonstration. I see there are three regulation buttons on the front of your single-breasted coat—no, don't look at them, look at me. I want you to depend on your past observations, if any, and on your memory. Now, Hale, you've been wearing buttons of that identical size on your coats ever since you were a small boy. You've buttoned and unbuttoned such buttons thousands of times. You're familiar with them—their precise dimensions, their diameters, their general aspect—aren't you?"

"I suppose so. Yes, of course I am."

"Then, still without looking down at them, suppose you tell me in terms of coins what the size of those three buttons is?"

"Well, let's see now." Hale, so cocksure a moment before, was now pondering as over an issue of tremendous importance. "They're bound to be larger than a penny—that stands to reason. I'd say they're the size of a nickel—no, a quarter."

"Exactly the size of a dime," Watsworth told him; "a dime being our smallest common coin. And the buttons on your cuff and waistcoat are smaller still. One trouble is that you think you know them, but you don't and you never have. And another reason for your being deceived lies in the fact that there's an optical illusion involved. Put a coin in the palm of your hand and it seems to shrink. Sew a button on your coat and it seems to grow larger. But in the last analysis it all comes down to a matter of observation and that's what most people lack, whether they realize it or not."

"I'm licked," confessed Hale and threw up both hands. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is indeed a notable occasion. Far be it from me to boast, but under the same roof we have with us the greatest button expert on earth and the most resourceful young woman of the present century."

With that he made a bowing motion toward Jean Rainey. She smiled in disclaimer, but before she could speak Hale went along, mending his hold on his enthusiasms.

"You needn't try to protest that you aren't, Jean, because you are." He included the rest of us now. "Why shouldn't she be? To begin with, here's a darned pretty, devilish stylish girl who's traveled about alone a lot and had experiences and knows the world. That helps. On top of that she was bred right—half Scot and half Irish. So she gets canniness and poise from her Scotch ancestors and audacity and authority and quick-wittedness from the Irish. I've seen her in action. There was one time—you remember that time, Jean, when we were on that motoring trip

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through the Berkshires two years ago and ran into a speed-trap and nobody had enough cash on hand to put up the bail and it looked like a night in the lock-up for the whole lot of us and then you—"

"Never mind that, please, Billy," she pleaded.

"Well, anyhow then, I'll say this much for you: I'm willing to stake any amount within reason that, singlehanded and without surrendering either your dignity or your sense of humor, you can get out of any dilemma no matter how difficult or how embarrassing it may seem to be—any dilemma, I mean, that it's humanly possible to get out of. If the thing can be carried off, I'll trust you to turn the trick. That's how much I think of your wisdom or your tact or diplomacy or whatever you want to call it."

Watsworth interrupted this high praise while Jean was shaking her head in a silent declination of compliments so extravagant. There was a cryptic gleam in Watsworth's eye as he said, "Do you know, Hale, I'd be more than half inclined to take you up on that, provided I could fix the terms and conditions —and provided, of course, Miss Rainey would agree to lend herself to the experiment. I'm not decrying Miss Rainey's abilities for handling unusual situations without asking help from anyone. If on such short acquaintance she'll permit me to say it, she strikes me as being just what you described her as being. Still, I believe I might win the bet."

"How much do you want to put up?" demanded Hale eagerly.

"Not much," said Watsworth. "I'm not after your money, I'm only trying to prove my point. Tell you what—I'll risk one silver dime against that topmost button on your coat."

"You're on," agreed Hale, "and in addition, the loser buys a dinner and opera tickets for the whole crowd of us."

"Suits me perfectly," said Watsworth, "but you haven't got Miss Rainey's consent yet."

"How about it, Jean?" asked Hale. "You won't go back on me now after what I've just been saying about you?"

"It might be fun, trying," she said, already half persuaded. "But naturally, before saying yes or no, I'd like Mr. Watsworth to explain just what idea he has in mind."

"I won't do that exactly, but I'll try to give you a sort of hint," he said. "A bit ago I was saying that the run of people aren't observant of little things and thereby miss a good deal out of life. I was wrong there. There is one thing, or rather one set of things, which they invariably see when somebody else is wearing them; a certain fascination seems to draw and focus their eyes to that particular quarter. And it has just occurred to me that if an attractive woman, after being equipped with these articles, should risk going about the streets

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of this town—or any town, for that matter—before long, say within thirty minutes, she probably would find herself involved in complications, official or otherwise, which it would be hard for her to explain to strangers. Conceivably, too, it might lead to a predicament where she would have to call us for help.

"Oh, if you're expecting me to break the laws—" she began.

"I'm not. You'll be absolutely inside the law. You have a perfect right to appear publicly in this guise. Anybody has."

"Or if I'm to be called on to parade around New York conspicuously displaying something or other which will make me appear grotesque or freakish—"

"I'm not requiring that of you, either," stated Watsworth. "The objects you'll wear are frequently worn by people—by men and women indiscriminately. Travelers take long journeys while wearing them. You'd find them on sale at any number of places here in New York. No doubt you've seen many persons wearing them. I won't claim they're exactly ornamental, but on occasion they're quite useful—yes, are even regarded as being necessary."

"Conceded that I decide to put on these mysterious adornments what will you want me to do?"

"Simply mind your own business, that's all. You conduct yourself as any right-minded independent young woman might who was out for a stroll or a shopping tour. You go in a drug store and order a soda. Or you stop at Grand Central and inquire at the Information Booth regarding a train. Or you drop into the Ritz for a cup of tea. Or, if you choose, you idle along the avenue and look in the show-windows; you enter a shop and make some trifling purchase.

"These are the only restrictions: on your word of honor you will not attempt to evade the scrutiny of passers-by—by that I mean you will neither take refuge in a taxicab nor seek to hide away from attention in any obscure or private retreat. Nor will you conceal or in any way disguise the things you are wearing, but constantly will keep them in full view. And should curiosity be aroused—should inquisitive individuals feel called upon to halt you and ask questions—you will tell them anything you please except the real facts of the case—namely, that you are trying to help a friend win a small wager. Exercise all your shrewdness, resort to any plausible subterfuge that may pop into your brain, laugh it off if you can, cry it off if you prefer—only keep the truth to yourself."

"And what if I do succeed?"

"Why, then you have only to come back here at the end of an hour from the moment you embark on the little undertaking and if you are still alone, still exactly as you were when you started, I'm stuck for the loser's end of the bet.

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If you have, let us say, been unavoidably detained you will telephone and that will be an admission on your part that you and your backer have lost."

"I'm game for it, whatever it is," she declared, her eyes sparkling. "It sounds ominous but fascinating. And I can't claim afterwards that you didn't give me fair warning of what may be in store for me!"

"Good for you, Jean!" applauded her champion.

"Where do we start from?" she asked.

"The entrance to this building will do as well as any spot, if you're agreeable," suggested Watsworth.

To that also she was agreeable.

"Very well, then," said Watsworth. "I'll dash out and buy the articles in question. As soon as I get back—which should be within ten minutes—I'll send word from downstairs and you come down, Miss Rainey—by yourself, if you please. I'll add one touch—just one, I promise—to your present very charming ensemble and launch you on the adventure. Hale may safely trust me not to try to slip over some underhanded trick on him or on you, eh, Hale?"

"I'll trust in Jean to guard my interests," proclaimed Hale. "I don't care to know any more. I'm sure of one thing—I win this bet."

But the rest of us cared to know more—and so admitted. Watsworth, though, declined to elucidate his riddle. For to us that's what it was—an intriguing, puzzling, and elusive riddle. We took turns at supplying the answer—as it turned out nobody was within a mile of being right—but Watsworth turned the dumb ear of a sphinx to our surmises.

They made me the purseholder and the judge, then Watsworth took his hat and departed. Outwardly Jean wasn't in the slightest degree nervous over the outcome. She remained a placid and unperturbed picture of trim, well-tailored competency. But privately I took note that she powdered her nose not once but twice.

Shortly the elevator operator brought word that a gentleman was waiting for her at the front door and she waved a calm and confident farewell to us as she stepped aboard the car. Almost immediately Watsworth came up, still maintaining his enigmatic role, and we compared watches and set ourselves to wait.

We didn't have to wait long.

According to my record, exactly thirty-two minutes of the allotted hour had elapsed when the telephone rang. In my capacity of arbiter I answered it.

Jean's voice came over the wire to me—a shaken, disconsolate voice it was, and all the self-possession gone out of it.

"Oh, dear," she confessed. "I've had a perfectly ghastly experience—and poor Billy has lost his button. I had a premonition that he was

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going to lose almost from the very instant I set out. The first man I met face to face stared at me suspiciously, and after I had passed him, still endeavoring to appear jaunty and unconcerned, he turned around and began following me; and other people joined in with him—why, before I'd gone half a block through the side street there was a regular procession tagging along behind me.

"And pretty soon the crowd had grown so that I could scarcely move. And the tongues wagging and the morbid eyes all glaring at me—well, altogether it was rather dreadful! And they discussed me just as openly as though I weren't hearing everything being said.

"One man kept saying he believed it was only some sort of publicity stunt—that probably I'd been hired to advertise a melodrama or something—but every time he said that at least a dozen others would chime in to say that I had a desperate, hunted look about me, as no doubt by that time I did. I know I felt desperate.

"Things got more and more serious, what with the mob growing and people dashing up alongside of me to take a closer look. But I managed somehow to get as far as Madison Avenue and Forty-ninth Street. By that time the jam was so thick that traffic on the sidewalk was absolutely blocked. And then, right at that corner, a policeman came up and rescued me—or perhaps I should say he arrested me. Anyhow, I actually welcomed the sight of him. I wanted to fall on his neck and faint. And now I'm here and very glad to be here, too. So you must hurry on over, all of you, and get me out."

"Come over where?" I demanded, while the others clustered behind me and gabbled incoherently, thus adding more confusion. "Get you out of what?"

"Come over to the police station—it's on East Fifty-first Street beyond Lexington Avenue," she answered with a rueful little laugh, "and get me out of jail. I'm a prisoner—it amounts to that. But the lieutenant in charge—he's a very nice person, too—will listen to reason, I'm sure, after he's heard what you have to say. As a matter of fact, he's a dear. He's letting me use the telephone and he swears to do his level best to stave off the reporters so there won't be any newspaper notoriety for me out of this—this idiotic escapade. And he promises to let me go free right away if it turns out that I'm not a dangerous runaway lunatic or a fugitive from justice."

Before we give you the end of the story: What did Watsworth ask Miss Rainey to wear? Mr. Cobb has played fair—he has supplied at least five revealing clues so far. If you are not sure of your deductions and/or guesses, please turn to page 81.

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Number Eleven in our new series of "first stories" . . . And here is an unusual "first"—unusual on several counts. The scene is Australia; the chief characters are veterinarians (we can't remember a previous mystery story about animal doctors!); certain aspects of the crime are remarkable, to say the least; and the story rings with sincerity and authenticity.

It will come to you as no surprise at all to learn that the author herself is a veterinarian, practicing in Victoria, Australia. She is in her forties, and her husband is Deputy Premier for Victoria—so, as she wrote to us, when she is not busy at her vocation she is "flying around official receptions." The Rylahs have two children at school and about "ten different jobs with the Girl Guide Movement (Girl Scouts)."

There is, as we have discovered time and time again, no real substitute for first-hand knowledge—so we hope to see more stories from Mrs. Rylah, especially about people and events in faraway Australia.

GIVE ME YOUR ANSWER, DO

by ANN RYLAH

I SUPPOSE IT'S NATURAL IN A SMALL country town for the few professional men to see a fair bit of one another; but in Murindi, at the time I'm talking about, the two of us were really close friends. I wouldn't be telling you about Charlie now if it wasn't that I dream about it so much, and speaking as a doctor I think there is a chance that writing it down may make it seem more like a story than a nightmare.

You see, in my dreams I'm actually there watching, but I can never do anything to stop it or to save either of them. It's like watching a play—the black darkness all around me, the wind whipping the gum trees across the night, the glare of the hissing light with the great horse dead beside the pit and the man working on it . . . everything sharp black-and-white and theatrical, yet far too grim for any theater . . .

Charlie Stokes was the only veterinary surgeon within 60 miles of Murindi, and when I came here as assistant to old Dr. Harrup, Charlie

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was a tower of strength to me from the start. He knew every man, woman, and child in the town and surrounding country, as well as practically every animal, and when old Harrup died I got into the habit of talking over my problems with Charlie.

He could tell me why Mrs. Cobham wouldn't let me take out Betty's tonsils and why Doll McWhirter wouldn't trust any medicine that wasn't pink. When I was baffled by the spread of ringworm at the local school—half the kids in town had their heads shaved—it was Charlie who pointed the bone at a pet fox cub that young Johnny Lum was nursing secretly in a hole under his father's shearing shed.

Not only that, by the time he'd finished with them, Mrs. Cobham was begging me to take out Betty's tonsils, Dolly would have swallowed a black liquid with green spots in it, and Johnny—Johnny Lum always reckoned the vixen must have turned up and collected the cub herself.

Charlie was like that—he'd go to endless bother to fix things up for people or to make sure a kid like Johnny wasn't hurt over what had to happen to his cub. But mind you, things had to be fixed *his* way. The trouble was he knew so much that he wouldn't allow for a minute that he didn't know everything; and if I suggested some new treatment to him, or quoted a recent medical article, he'd flare up and tell me I didn't know anything about animals—which was true enough, I suppose.

At the time of old Harrup's death I was 28 and Charlie would have been about 40, but he was as touchy about his professional ability as though he'd just been graduated. Once he had made a diagnosis, it was right and no one was allowed to question it; he would discuss his cases with me, but always on the basis of "I decided" and "I intend"—and if ever I made a suggestion or dared to question his treatment he would climb on his high horse at once.

I must admit it went down well wtih the farmers. When he was right and he generally was) it was "Charlie Strokes said that all along"; and when he was very occasionally proved wrong no one threw it up at him. It was more a case of "Anyone can make a mistake and he's a hard worker, that Charlie"—and outback in Australia a man who's a hard worker is forgiven a lot.

Charlie was a good bloke to have at a party too—popular with the women as well as the men, though I often wondered how his wife got on with him. I never knew a wife yet who didn't pick at her husband a bit, and as I've said, Charlie couldn't stand criticism and the only joke he couldn't see was one against himself.

Beryl Stokes was younger than

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Charlie and never seemed quite to fit into any gathering—she was one of those colorless people that you are always sorry for but always avoid if you can. There weren't any children to fill her time and give her something to talk about with the other women, and as Charlie always seemed to be out on his rounds or yarning with me or Bob Wright, our senior constable, or having a drink at the pub with the boys, she must have been alone a good deal.

After we got irrigation at Murindi, the town began to grow and I hadn't much time for yarning; but if irrigation increased the town's population, it tripled the number of stock the land would carry, and Charlie was doing three men's work. I got him to come in for a check-up one day, and at last persuaded him to get an assistant—so perhaps it was all my fault. It's hard to say.

It wasn't long after that—maybe a month or so—that young Jack Ferrers moved in with the Stokeses and put his brass plate up on the fence beside Charlie's old one, and I hoped Charlie would begin to lose that exhausted look. But it didn't work out too well. Ferrers was fresh from the University and he knew it all. He was full of the latest treatments and the latest methods and he was all for showing Murindi—and Charlie—what modern science could do.

The farmers round about swallowed his line of sales talk and began asking his advice—and, of course, that made Charlie hopping mad. He didn't mind sending Ferrers out to see some of his own cases, but he wasn't going to have his old friends *asking* for Ferrers—and when it was a case of a pedigree bull or a valuable brood mare, that was often what they did, and there wasn't a thing Charlie could do about it.

The business of old "Holy" Waters' cow is what brought things to a head. Charlie had been treating Holy's cow for dysentry for two years but without much success. Young Jack Ferrers took one look, condemned it as Johne's disease, had the cow slaughtered, and notified the State Veterinary Officer—all without even consulting Charlie.

They had a stand-up row about it in the main street for all the town to hear. And when the laboratory confirmed Ferrer's diagnosis and the Veterinary Department people moved in and quarantined all Holy's herd for five years, I thought Charlie would have a stroke. It was a hard thing to happen to a man like Charlie.

You'd have thought Beryl must be having a pretty thin time living in the same house with two men who were always bickering, but actually she seemed to thrive on it. When I saw her at a party just before our local Show, I hardly knew her. It wasn't only that she had on

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the first smart frock I'd ever seen her wear, it was more a sort of glow about her—there was color in her sallow cheeks and she was talking and laughing like anyone else.

Maybe it wasn't a new frock, maybe it just looked better because of the way she carried herself—I know I remember wondering if she'd been drinking before she came. And then she turned to say something to Jack Ferrers and I knew what it was. I couldn't hear a word she was saying, but I knew from the way she looked at him. He had his back to me, so I couldn't tell about him, and I don't know to this day.

I looked round for Charlie and saw that he was watching them with a look in his eyes I didn't like; so I started to work my way across to him while my mind ran round in circles like a dingo pup. Charlie wasn't a man who could stand being made a fool of, and what with Ferrers getting along so well with the farmers, and then the affair of Holy's cow—well, if he even suspected that his assistant was trying to steal his wife there'd be trouble, big trouble. "Charlie Stokes" had been a name to be reckoned with in the district for years, and in a way that had been meat and drink to him; if he thought people were laughing at him behind his back he wouldn't be able to take it.

I might have tried to interfere, but when our Agricultural Show is on there's no time to think of anything else. Charlie and I were both on the Committee and we worked like slaves. Fortunately, in country towns like ours, no one would dream of getting sick during Show Week, and the few accidents and babies that came along got sandwiched in somehow. The Show is a three-day Affair, and people come from hundreds of miles around and generally whoop it up in Murindi for a full week; so it was only in odd moments that I got time to worry about Charlie and Ferrers—and then no sooner was the Show over than the anthrax outbreak hit us.

We reckoned that some of the stock from interstate must have brought it, or maybe it was on the blades the men used in the sheep-shearing competition; anyway, the aftermath of the Show that year was a full-scale anthrax epidemic.

Bob Wright was filling in forms all day when he wasn't tearing round in his car enforcing a "stand-still order" for all stock and supervising the burning or burial in quicklime of all carcasses. Charlie and young Ferrers were working like bullocks, checking on deaths, shooting in-contacts, making blood smears for the laboratories, lecturing to farmers on what to do, and vaccinating, vaccinating all day, though the State Veterinary Officers were helping all they could. I was sitting on batches of serum I'd ordered and

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praying no human cases would crop up to turn tragedy into disaster.

The veterinary team was quite safe—they knew enough not to touch an infected carcass; but hides were fetching £6 to £7 in those days and it was a big temptation, when a horse or cow died, for the farmer to skin it secretly before he burned the carcass—and if he had even a tiny scratch on his hand (and show me a countryman who hasn't) it could mean death.

I never admired Charlie Stokes so much. It was largely because everybody was used to doing exactly what he told them and because everybody trusted him implicitly that the local stockowners obeyed the commands he thundered at them and that order began to emerge from confusion. And in the middle of all that hoo-ha and panic Charlie still found time to attend to his old clients and help out with their problems.

When the Reids' old draught horse Daisy, that used to cart all the kids to school, picked that particular time to get colic, and Reid was tearing round town trying to catch up with Charlie to get him to see her, I heard Charlie promise to get round somehow that same day. He did, too, because when I called at the Reids' the next day to have a look at young Billy's throat, there was Reid and his man digging a great hole down in the scrub.

Apparently it wasn't colic at all but a growth of some sort, and Charlie had had to break it to Reid and his kids that Daisy would have to be destroyed and buried. Because of the "no movement of stock" order she couldn't be taken to the knackers, so the men were digging a hole for her and Charlie was calling round that night after the children would be in bed to do what had to be done.

When I got back into town I saw young Ferrers getting out of his car and stopped to have a chat with him. After he heard where I'd been, he told me Charlie had asked him to go out with him to Reid's that night and give him a hand, and I remember thinking Charlie must be mellowing if he asked Ferrers to help him—and being thankful I'd held my tongue over the past few weeks since things were working out all right after all.

Apparently it was quite late that night before both men were free, and all the Reids were in bed and the house was dark when they arrived. So Charlie and Ferrers went straight to the paddock where they knew Daisy would be, and she was shot and buried long before the youngsters were about in the morning. There was a high wind that night, so Charlie reckoned the kids couldn't even have heard the shot at the house. It was like him to be glad about a thing like that.

I had never had much time for

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young Ferrers—he was a bit too much of a smart alec for me; but I decided he must have had some decent feelings because after Charlie extended the olive branch by asking his help with Daisy, Ferrers cleared right out of town—packed up and left without a word some time later that night, without even going to bed.

Leaving no word like that could have caused a bit of trouble if I hadn't had a quiet word with Bob Wright who was thinking Ferrers might have had an accident and be lying hurt somewhere. But knowing why the boy had gone and not wanting too much talk about it, I stretched things a bit by saying he'd hinted to me that he was intending to clear out; and when Bob found all Ferrers' clothes gone from the Stokes's spare room he was perfectly willing to let the matter drop.

Of course Beryl was in a great state—she even came round to me with all sorts of wild ideas, as if I could do anything. I prescribed a sleeping tablet, put her to bed, and gave her a good talking to—I didn't want her upsetting Charlie all over again just when he'd been so decent about everything.

Well, the anthrax outbreak was got under control quickly, although the farmers lost a lot of valuable stock, and we've never had that kind of trouble since. As it turned out ,we had only one human case, which wasn't a bad record. He came into my surgery late one afternoon and he looked so gray and old that I was on my feet in shock even before he spoke.

"Charlie, for God's sake—what's the matter, man?"

The devil of it was that he knew, of course—as I did the moment he showed me his arms with the black-centered ulcers already on them. I was so upset I almost shouted at him.

"You fool, you stupid *fool!* You've done a post-mortem on one of them."

He looked at me, puzzled.

"Of course I haven't—what d'you take me for, The only P.M. I've done in weeks was on old Daisy. Jack reckoned she didn't have a growth, so I—"

And then he went white and I thought he was going to faint.

I just caught his whisper, "Daisy—oh, *no!*" before he collapsed; and all the time I was ringing for our ambulance and opening serum, that stupid nonsense about *Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer, do* kept jingling in my brain.

And she did give us the answer when the health authorities dug her up to burn the carcass and lime the ground . . .

Charlie had shot her at the edge of the pit and then conscientious as ever, he did a P.M. to confirm his diagnosis. Did Ferrers jeer at him for it, I wonder, and so goad the old lion too far?

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I hope so, in a way, because I hate to think that Charlie—good old Charlie Stokes—could have planned it all, including the friendly invitation to Ferrers to help him.

Honestly, I'd hate to think any man could plan such an end for another. Because after Daisy's great frame was emptied, Charlie must have shot Ferrers too—before he put young Ferrers inside the big rib cage and sewed him in there for a coffin.

Do you wonder that I still see that scene whenever I go to sleep? The gale carrying away the sound of two shots where there should only have been one, the dark trees tossing, and in the bright glare of the kerosene lamp one man putting another into that dreadful burial place . . .

In spite of everything I can't help being glad that at least Charlie found out his diagnosis was right —the police told me that—because that would have mattered to Charlie even on that awful night. But he couldn't know when he condemned Daisy that she was already incubating the disease he'd been fighting for weeks. Even so, I'm surprised he didn't wear protective clothing. Unless, of course, Ferrers advised him to, just before the end. Charlie wouldn't ever take advice and least of all from young Ferrers.

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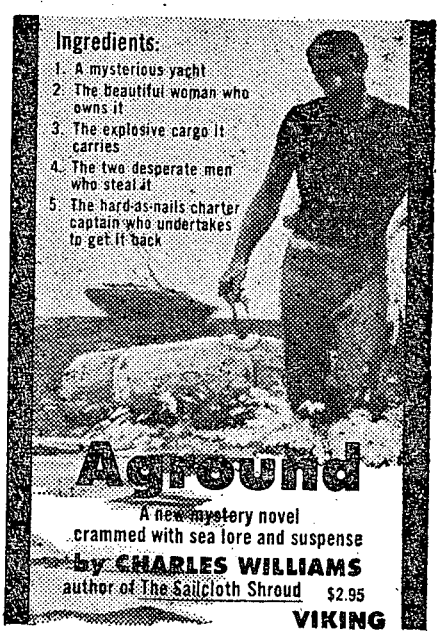
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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**CHARLES B. CHILD**
TITLE:	***The Chicken Feather of Rumor***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Inspector Chafik
LOCALE:	Baghdad
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*"Rumor is a sly, night-living thing; the trail it leaves is tenuous, as fragile as a spider's thread"—or as light as a chicken feather . . . Welcome back, Inspector!*

ONE DAY IN BAGHDAD, A SMALL boy who carried his shoes dodged through the ferment of traffic on Rashid Street and arrived, miraculously unscathed, outside the drab headquarters of the security police. He ducked under the arm of the guard, threw open a door lettered *Chafik J. Chafik, Chief Inspector, Department of Criminal Investigation,* and cried, "My father! There is a man who will kill himself and it is not proper to do away with the life that has been given us and—" His breath gave out.

Inspector Chafik got up from his desk, which was walled in by filing cabinets, and angrily reprimanded the guard. "An assassin, instead of my son, might have made this unceremonious entry!" he said.

Chafik, immaculate in a well-tailored white suit appropriate for the hot summer of Baghdad, was a slight, small-boned man whose swarthy face was sharpened by high cheekbones and a prominent nose. The profile he turned was as arrogant as that of a Babylonian king, but his face and voice softened as he said to the guard, "I do wrong to blame you. Nobody can stop my son when he is running. He is of the bazaars."

Chafik dismissed the guard and turned to the boy, gazing tenderly down at the elfin face and huge dark eyes. This was his adopted son. Chafik had chosen him from

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the many waifs who lived by their wits in the great bazaars of Baghdad, and taken him into a childless home. Polygamy, permitted by Islamic law if the first wife proves barren, was unacceptable to Chafik. He loved Leila, his lady of many happy years, very dearly, and they both loved the boy they had taken to be their son.

With effort the Inspector hardened his heart and said sternly, "Faisal! Why do you not wear the shoes your mother bought you?"

"My father, I do not wear shoes because I had to run faster than fast to tell you about the man who will murder himself, and shoes do not help the feet to go fast, and—"

"I have a slipper at home that goes very, very fast!"

Faisal looked pleadingly at his father. "Please do not spank me because I bring news Mr. Shaddock is going to cut his throat!"

"Eh? You say Shaddock?" exclaimed Chafik. He began talking to himself in a singsong voice: *Shaddock, Ali. Age, fifty. Profession, import merchant. Recently suspected of smuggling activities, no previous conviction. Married. Name of wife—*" The Inspector heard himself quoting from the official dossier and stopped; thinking aloud was an old and unbreakable habit, but it never failed to annoy him.

"The wife is named Anina!" Faisal said quickly, eager to placate. "All Baghdad knows he is going to do it because of her, and because she left him, and because he must forfeit the dowry he gave her when they got married, and because he's pockets-down with debts, and—"

Chafik paced the carpet of his office, deep in thought and forgetful of the boy. "Nonsense!" he said sharply, as if to an adult. "The religious courts, which deal with matters concerning the dowry given by the husband to the wife, and with divorce, will decide in his favor. I am informed that there is another man in the story, that it is *she* who seeks the divorce."

"Everybody knows she has pulled him around by the nose these many years!" Faisal said.

Chafik became ruefully aware of his son. "Rumor shouts from the housetops!" he said. "You have been with the bazaar boys, that Army of Little Ears that infests keyholes!"

"It is true I had the report from my men, my father, but the tale is told everywhere."

The Inspector sighed and gently drew Faisal to him. "About this matter of rumor," he began. "Listen! There was once a respected chicken, and she lost a feather searching for fleas with her beak. A second chicken told a third chicken about seeing the feather fall, but the gossiping chicken made it two feathers. So the news went around the coop, and each time *another* feather fell—until it was said the original chicken had

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plucked out *all* her feathers and was running about undressed. So they pounced on her, beat her, clucked, 'You're a disgrace!' and threw her out."

The Inspector raised an admonishing forefinger as he finished his parable: "Before you help spread rumor, my son, always remember how softly fell that first feather!"

The telephone interrupted. "Chafik J. Chafik!" he said curtly. Then, hearing a deep warm voice, he added hastily, "Never am I too busy to talk to you, Wife!"

"My man! Faisal has not yet returned from school, and I wondered if—"

"He is here and has no immediate desire to return home. A rendezvous has been made between a certain part of his anatomy and my slipper!"

The wife of Inspector Chafik laughed. "Ah, so you say now!" she mocked. "Without doubt you will feed him many honey cakes in a café somewhere and forget the matter of delinquency . . . My man, I was at our sister's just now, and there was a lot of talk, and everybody wondered what you would do about Mr. Shaddock. He—"

"Wait!" Chafik broke in. "I have just narrated a parable on that subject to our son."

"So he knew too?"

"You both have unrivaled sources of rumor," Chafik said dryly and closed the conversation.

There had been a discreet knock on the door and now a large man entered. He wore a sergeant's stripes, and the holster at his belt was as worn as his mahogany-colored face. "Sir!" he said and saluted.

The Inspector studied his dour assistant and said, "Abdullah, you are the shadow of a kite hawk that circles over a desert kill!"

"Yes sir," answered Sergeant Abdullah, and glanced disapprovingly at the Inspector's son.

"To send Faisal from us," said Chafik, "would only encourage his curiosity and leave him with the nasty answers of an uninstructed boy. You would not understand, Abdullah—you only have daughters."

"Three, sir. They curb their curiosity," the sergeant added smugly.

Chafik reddened. "Report!" he said gruffly.

"Sir," Abdullah announced, "the individual named Ali Shaddock, who is of interest to us, has apparently drowned himself. His body awaits you across the river, near the place where his estranged wife lives. I venture to point out that all this was anticipated. Everybody knew that Shaddock intended—"

"Enough!" Chafik's face flamed. He drove his fist into his palm and shouted, "Sons of jinn and evil spirits! All Baghdad knew he would kill himself—except me!" But his anger quickly passed, and he touched curved fingers to his

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forehead in a salaam to his sergeant. "Forgive me, Abdullah, as I hope the All Merciful will forgive me," the Inspector said humbly.

The brassy sun had set and silver stars were lighting up one by one when Inspector Chafik and his assistant arrived at the Karradat Miriam, a residential district on the other side of the Tigris. Here there were date palms, small farms, and mellow old houses built on the embankment.

"This is the place," Abdullah said, and stopped the car on a parapet high above the river, which was very low at this time of the year. Chafik followed the sergeant down the steps to a boat landing.

Gentle ripples lapped against a dark bulk that had been dragged halfway up on the beach. Nearby waited a constable and a civilian. "This gentleman found the body," the constable told the Inspector. "He hailed me as I passed on patrol. He was trying to drag it out."

"So commendable!" said Chafik, glancing briefly at the civilian. "Your evidence will be required. I am sure the constable has all particulars. You are a stranger in Baghdad?"

"I am of Basrah. Oh, what a dreadful experience! If only I had arrived sooner—just a few minutes—I might have saved this pitiable one who has damned his soul!" The man who spoke with such agitation was middle-aged, square, and strong but a little soft with sedentary living. The expression in his olive-brown eyes was strained as he went on, "I was on my way to a café named the Pleasant Hours. So ironical—"

"No pleasant hour here for you," agreed Chafik.

"Such a thing to happen! Never in my life! I was walking, and I . . ." The man went on to tell again how he had found the body.

The Inspector thought with tedium: bah, these civilians, always the same—meet their first corpse, think it's never happened to anyone before, talk their heads off. His eyes fixed cynically on the man from Basrah. "So the deceased was unconscious when you found him?"

"Oh, yes! I assure you I took action at once. I—"

"As you have told me," Chafik interrupted curtly. Then he made an effort at politeness: "But I have kept you too long. You are wet and the night is chilly after the day. My car is at your disposal." The Inspector salaamed, and the man turned away with obvious reluctance. "You didn't know the poor fool who drowned himself?" Chafik asked, and quickly berated himself when the man turned back.

"I do not even know his name. If I might be told why he—"

This time the Inspector's salaam was dismissal. Abdullah escorted the man to the car and instructed the driver to return.

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Inspector Chafik glanced at the body and said dryly to the constable, "Of course, *you* know the name of this unfortunate one?"

"Ali Shaddock, sir. All Baghdad said he would—"

"—do away with himself." Chafik finished the sentence in a dangerously quiet voice. "I suppose you babbled all this to the gentleman, eh?"

The constable's look was reproachful. Chafik patted his arm. "Of course you wouldn't! And you got all his particulars?"

"He is named Mohammed Fahay, an official of the Port of Basrah."

"I'll want a full report later. Meanwhile I'll interview this gentleman. The Inspector indicated the body at his feet.

When he finished the examination, Chafik took off his shoes and socks, pulled up his trousers, and waded into the river. He went a long way out before the water reached his knees. "Where was the corpse found?" he called back.

The constable replied, "Nearer the bank than you now are, sir, according to Mr. Fahay. When I saw him he had it very near shore. He said he dragged it about ten meters, perhaps more."

"Fortunately, the gentleman is strong and Shaddock was slight." Chafik continued to wade out, but presently gave it up. "One can wade almost to the middle at this time of the year," he said when he came back. "The deep water is off the other bank; if *I* doubted the compassion of God, I would drown myself there."

He used a handkerchief to dry his feet, put on socks and shoes, and said to Sergeant Abdullah, "Well, let's go and tell Ali Shaddock's woman that Death has settled her divorce."

They walked along a path by date palms. Packs of pariah dogs came to snarl at their heels and were driven off by Abdullah, who had filled his pockets with rocks.

"One never walks in these parts without provision," he said.

"You will doubtlessly present yourself at the gates of Paradise thoughtfully provided with equipment for the Other Place," Chafik said smiling, and Abdullah grinned appreciatively.

Presently the sergeant said, "With reference to Shaddock's drowning, sir, I have the impression you are not satisfied it is suicide."

"I am puzzled," the Inspector admitted. "The water was so shallow. It takes a lot of courage to keep your head in a puddle to take your life."

"Yet he may have been desperate."

"We'll find out how desperate when we talk to his wife. Did you notice what was ejected from his lungs and stomach when you tried resuscitation?"

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"Sand and mud, sir. Also specimens of the organisms that populate the river bed."

"In other words, he bit the muck down there. Isn't that the action of a man who struggled against a force more aggressive than his will power?" Chafik asked. Then he added thoughtfully, "And there's that mark on the neck—it could be a bruise."

"Do you suggest he was *held* under?" exclaimed Abdullah.

"At this stage I suggest nothing. I am not yet ready to weave—I still gather threads. Among other things, Abdullah, I want a careful check of that man, Fahay, who found the body."

"But he is a stranger to Baghdad, sir—"

"Precisely. Yet he spoke of Shaddock's damned soul. He didn't see the drowning, and if he didn't know Shaddock, why would he associate him with that wretched tale of suicide?"

"It would not take unusual powers of deduction, sir," said the sergeant. "He heard a man intended taking his life and then found a man drowned."

Chafik laughed. "Splendid, my dear Abdullah! I told you we are not ready for the weaving! Ah, well, let's give our knock and break the news to the lady here." He rapped his knuckles on the gate they had come to.

The path had led them to a fertile plantation where there was a small, neat house. This was the property Ali Shaddock had given his wife as a marriage gift, the disposition of which the divorce courts had questioned.

"I wouldn't have to be a policeman if I owned this," said Chafik.

There were lights in the house but nobody came, and the Inspector repeated his knock with authority. An old woman, a servant, finally opened the gate and said in a frightened voice, "My lady has retired. She—"

"You sound instructed," Inspector Chafik said.

He walked through the gate and stood a moment in the well-kept patio, drinking in the fragrance of night-blooming flowers. "There is much beauty behind the barred doors of Baghdad," he said with pleasure. "Also mystery," he added and indicated a shadow flattened to a wall.

Abdullah dragged into the light a young man, who wailed, "I'm only a visitor! I was leaving!" He had a sullen mouth, narrow eyes that would never come to meeting with another's, and the dark grace of a panther.

The Inspector stood tiptoe and patted the youth's cheek. "Shaving is no problem," he said, and with distaste: "Can this be the delight of women with middle-aged husbands? I know you, Mr. Maqsud Majib. Because of you, the divorce courts question Mrs. Shaddock's right to this property."

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"Such unfairness!" protested Majib, struggling in the sergeant's grip. "I only help work the estate. I—"

"A woman's marriage gift is a trust," Chafik said sternly. "I refer you to the excellent Koran: 'Give women their dowries as a free gift; but if they of themselves be pleased to give you a portion of it back, then eat it with enjoyment.'"

The Inspector added, "You would eat it like a locust, Mr. Majib."

A shadow loomed over him and Chafik turned and made a salaam to an unveiled lady who stood as tall as Juno. She was of an age when a woman has the startling beauty of the fall somberly edged with regret for the spring. "What is this talk about locusts?" she demanded in a strong voice.'

"Madame, my nimble tongue is shamed by your quick ears."

"Let your face show shame also. Majib spoke the truth. He works this land as my overseer, yet the courts have decided against me!"

"But the news is not yet public. I heard it only a little time ago. Who told you, lady?" Chafik's voice was softer than the purring of a cat.

"My husband."

"He was here?"

"You know that. You came to arrest him!" The strong voice rang with rage. "*You* sent the false message telling Ali I wished to see him! A trap!"

The Inspector was startled. Forgetful of manners, he lighted a cigarette without asking the lady's permission. "Why should I want to arrest your husband?" he asked.

"Ali said he had done something; he did not explain, but he said he was going to confess. The fool babbled some nonsense about prison being cleansing!" the wife of Ali Shaddock added with contempt.

Chafik thought: Yet rumor would have it that he damned himself by taking his life. He said, "What else did he tell you?"

"The decision of the courts. He said, too, that he would make me an allowance." The woman added grudgingly, "In many ways he is a just man."

"I hear regret in your voice, Madame—possibly remorse."

"I hear a snake's hiss in yours!"

"They always say that about me." Chafik watched the woman carefully. "When did Mr. Shaddock leave you?"

"Perhaps an hour ago."

"And was your overseer hidden on the premises at the time?"

The woman towered dangerously and the Inspector retreated a step. "Majib came later!" she cried. "Later!"

"I was at a café!" the youth insisted. "The Pleasant Hours, up the river—"

"The place recently mentioned by somebody else," Chafik said thoughtfully. He crushed his ciga-

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rette under his heel and then stooped, with instinctive tidiness, to pick up the stub. Still crouched, he saw the legs of Majib's trousers; they were oddly crumpled for a young fop. The Inspector reached out, touched the fabric, and said, "Wet!" in the voice of an accuser.

"I stumbled into an irrigation ditch," Majib said quickly. "It was dark—"

"Strange you should not know the pitfalls of the land you work!"

The Inspector straightened up, and this time he did not retreat when the imposing Madame Shaddock came between him and Majib. "Your questions, like fishhooks, are barbed," she said. "Why are you here?"

He waited a moment before he replied, "Madame, do you not know a detestable individual like myself always walks at Death's heels? Your husband drowned himself after he left you."

The wife of Ali Shaddock shrieked, put hands to her piled hair, tore it down, and was constrained by the Inspector when she sought to beat her head against the wall. The excessive grief did not surprise him; he was wise to the women of his country who employed histrionics and the purdah veil to hide their true emotions.

Chafik gave Madame Shaddock into the keeping of the old servant woman. "You don't seem very keen to comfort your lady," he said to the young man.

"I didn't know her husband was here," Majib protested. "I was in the café. Besides, all Baghdad knew he was going to do away with himself."

"Did I say he *didn't?*" asked Chafik. He kept his eyes on Madame Shaddock, who was staring at Majib with horror—and perhaps fear.

"You fool!" she said harshly, "did you not hear him say Ali drowned himself!" All at once she crumpled, and the servant led her away.

Watching, Chafik felt compassion born of sudden understanding. She had come to a place in life where she stood on the crest of the hill and felt panic at the descent. It is a moment women encounter, Chafik thought, and men too. She was a woman who had no children to compensate for the lost vanities of youth. No children, and now no husband, and she knew her lover to be craven. Whatever her guilt, she had paid dearly.

Chafik sighed, turned to the young man, and said, "Go to your Café of the Pleasant Hours; you will find no more of them here!" He turned to his assistant. "Come, Abdullah," and the two men walked back to the car and drove away.

The sergeant stopped the car outside the small house in the Street of the Scatterer of Blessings. "The detestable young man was eager to establish an alibi," he said.

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"You will check it, Abdullah."

Chafik opened the gate to the forecourt of his house, and the squeaking hinges reminded him they needed oiling. "All that talk about Shaddock's doing away with himself—as noisy as this gate," he complained. "Too well publicized, that suicide. Somebody was very anxious to make us believe it."

"We must discover how the rumor started, sir," Abdullah said.

"Yes, but booted policemen with blunt questions, or furtive agents with oily insinuations, will get us nowhere. Rumor is a sly, night-living thing; the trail it leaves is tenuous, as fragile as a spider's thread. We will begin where the trail ended—with my son."

"But, sir!" the sergeant exclaimed.

"Faisal heard the story from his friends, the bazaar boys. I'll get him to trace it back through them."

The Inspector closed his ears to objection, said good night, and went into the house. At the door, Faisal took his father's shoes and placed them under the hall table, and then humbly presented a slipper. "By your command, my father! It is for that spanking I'm to get for breaking in on you with the news about Mr. Shaddock."

Chafik, who had forgotten the incident, said fondly, "Honey cakes!" and gave Faisal a package. "And there is important business to discuss with you, my small Captain of the Most Irregular Army of Little Ears!"

Inspector Chafik sat in his office overlooking Rashid Street, talking to himself. The ashtray at his elbow was neatly stacked with butts and, adding another to the pile, he said, "You are as well smoked as an Englishman's kipper, Chafik!" He lighted a fresh cigarette and stared at the reports on his desk.

There was proof that the bruise on Shaddock's neck had been made by a weighty object. Medical opinion said he had been partially stunned, then dragged into the river. "They drowned him like a helpless kitten!" Chafik said.

Abdullah, entering unobtrusively, asked, "Who are 'they,' sir?"

"The prize for that question is a hangman's noose. But we have no clues, nothing that points to anyone," the Inspector said plaintively. "There is Majib. He was obviously planning to marry the lady for her property; he had every reason to get rid of Shaddock before the divorce was final."

"But the courts had decided, sir—"

"Majib had not heard the decision." Chafik added reluctantly, "Madame Shaddock could have been a party to the deed."

"It is not without precedent," agreed the sergeant.

"Worse, she might have done it herself. She is strong enough, was infatuated enough. If that evil

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youth induced her to . . . Ah, what an ugly pattern I weave!" The little man sighed. "And then there's Fahay."

"The gentleman who discovered the body, sir?"

"A report from Basrah states he is a minor port official," Chafik said. "He checks goods coming into port against the importer's license. Therefore—"

"Shaddock dealt in contraband!" Abdullah said excitedly. "Fahay could have forged documents to release goods from bond!"

"You leap on a theory with the frenzy of a honey-drunk bee in a clump of honeysuckle, Abdullah. True, Shaddock had an illegal trade. Poor man," Chafik said with regret, "he was tempted when he thought he had to pay the dowry. Then the courts decided in his favor and his worries were over. But God had given him a conscience, so he decided to confess."

"And was killed to silence his tongue!" exclaimed the sergeant.

"There you go again," Chafik said peevishly. "We have nothing against Mr. Fahay. The Port Directorate where he works is a department heavy with paper work, and with bottomless filing cabinets. It would take a lifetime to uncover evidence—if there is any!"

He added wearily, "My hopes hang on the fragile thread of the suicide rumor. If I knew who started it, if my son would only bring news!"

Abdullah said briskly, "Faisal has had his chance. Permit me to—"

The Inspector put a finger to his lips. "Sh-sh! I think news arrives."

There was an uproar in the corridor, the thump of boots, the shrill voice of a boy and the gruff one of a man. And then Faisal came in, firmly held by the guard, who said with satisfaction, "He did not pass me this time!"

"This time," Chafik said dryly, "I expected my son. Release him."

When the crestfallen officer left, Chafik sat back in his chair, closed his eyes, and said, "Report!"

Faisal began: "The story that Mr. Shaddock would kill himself was told me by George, one of my men, the one that's got red hair. George's father was an English soldier, and—"

"Confine yourself to the rumor."

"Yes, my father. George heard from Ali of the One Eye, who was told by Haik the Armenian, who had it from Yusif, who got it from Habib of the Clubfoot, who overheard Ibrahim the Coppersmith telling Hamid the Carpet Weaver. And Mr. Ibrahim, when I asked him, remembered he'd been told by Murad the Porter, who said he'd heard it from Ishak—"

"Do you bring all the population of Baghdad into this?"

"I near the end," said Faisal. "Ishak brought the tale from across the river. He heard it in a café, but doesn't remember who told him."

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"What is the name of the café?"

"It is called the Pleasant Hours, my father."

The Inspector's eyes opened; they glowed like the stone in the signet ring on the small finger of his left hand. "I hear that café mentioned a third time!" he cried, and then was silent.

Faisal and Sergeant Abdullah waited side by side; the boy stood like his giant companion, hands behind his back, legs apart, the military position of "at ease." The clock on the wall ticked noisily.

When the Inspector finally looked up, he said, "My little Captain of the Army of the Ears, do you recall the parable I told you about the chicken?"

Faisal came to attention. "Yes, my father. There was a chicken and it plucked out one feather, and all the other chickens said it had lost many, and—"

"Go," said Chafik, "and drop a feather very softly to your man George, who will tell Ali, who will tell Hassan, who . . . Oh, just let it be known that Mr. Shaddock did *not* take his life—he was murdered!"

"His throat was cut? There was blood?" Faisal asked breathlessly.

"Go!" said the Inspector.

He sat at his desk, deep in thought, until it was dark. His sergeant eventually took him home.

The next day Chafik went to the office, greeted nobody, and sat in thought as before. Abdullah brought him reports. He said, "Sir, it is rumored all over Baghdad now that Mr. Shaddock was murdered."

"He was," Chafik said. He was silent for another hour, and then he said, "Bring me the Captain of the Little Ears."

Faisal, schooled by Abdullah, came and saluted. Chafik gazed at him. "Go," he ordered, "and drop another feather. Let all Baghdad know that at precisely six o'clock tomorrow evening I shall arrive at the Café of the Pleasant Hours to arrest the killer of Mr. Shaddock!"

Faisal forgot discipline, clapped his hands, and asked, "Can I come too?"

"Go!" his father said.

When Faisal went, Sergeant Abdullah risked reprimand. "Sir! I am ignorant of your intentions, but I believe that the murderer will be alarmed by this latest rumor, that he will become dangerous."

"Murder," announced the Inspector, "is not the prerogative of the male sex. Danger, however, is the prerogative of the police."

The third day Chafik was early at his desk. He sat and stared at the wall. He did not eat; he did not smoke. He thought about the chicken feather of rumor, and he hoped and feared that somewhere, someone who dealt in death would accept the appointment he made.

The sergeant came to him at the

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hour of 'Asr, the late-afternoon prayer. "Majib is drinking heavily," he announced.

"It will corrode his liver," Chafik said. "Then he will die. Good!"

"The man Fahay canceled his flight to Basrah this morning."

"Doubtlessly he finds the fleshpots of Baghdad hard to leave."

"The woman, Madame Shaddock," said Abdullah, "has been seen walking in the date grove, as one obsessed."

"She mourns either her husband or her lover," said the Inspector.

"And the lady, your wife, is on the wire, sir."

Chafik took the telephone and, hearing the voice of his Leila, peace came to him. "The music of Paradise could not be sweeter," he told her.

"My man, I am frightened! I hear you are going to the café to arrest the murderer of Mr. Shaddock. Madame Bassmachi brought the news, and she heard it from Madame—"

The Inspector said, "I've heard something like that before! Do not worry, my Leila." He hung up the telephone.

He reached for his *sidarah* and set the black cap squarely on his head. He adjusted his polka-dot tie, passed a finger over his thin mustache, and said to Sergeant Abdullah, "Let us go!"

The Inspector refused a car, and walked to the Café of the Pleasant Hours in the twilight. A policeman on traffic duty saluted and called, "Good fortune, sir!" and a beggar at the foot of the great bridge that crossed the Tigris cupped a hand for alms and mumbled, "A thousand sons! May you take the evil one who killed Shaddock!"

Out of nowhere darted a small boy, redheaded and freckled, who touched the Inspector's hand, gave a toothless smile, and announced, "We will be there to help you!" He hitched up ragged trousers, his only garment, and ran ahead.

"Without doubt that is Faisal's man George," said Chafik.

He stopped in the middle of the bridge and wiped his forehead. Sergeant Abdullah looked at him with understanding and said in a strained voice, "An abnormally hot night, sir."

"On the contrary, it is abnormally cool. I perspire because I am frightened. Even the shrilling of the birds becomes the whistle of an assassin's bullets. I am a coward."

"You go *to* the rendezvous, sir, not away from it."

"Thank you, Abdullah. You are right: fear is not a synonym for cowardice."

"You expect the murderer to be there?" asked the sergeant.

"I have used a powerful magnet," said Chafik. "The murderer will have to know if identification has really been made, if clues have been discovered. Killers have often

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been known to attend the funerals of their victims."

Beyond the bridge was a broad way lined with cafés. The Inspector walked slowly and watchfully; at his side loomed Abdullah, the flap of his holster open and his hand ready, like the inflated hood of a cobra raised for a strike. "Walk well behind me," Chafik said sharply. "Even the innocent would swoon at the sight of you!"

He increased his pace and came to a great arch, a monument to past glory; opposite was a café. The green benches set out under the dusty locust trees were crowded, and the sound of excited conversations filled the night. As the Inspector crossed the road, the noise stopped.

He came to a group of women, alike in shapeless black robes worn with a fold over the head to hide the face. One tall, stately woman stood apart, and Chafik thought: There could be a gun under that chuddar! He walked quickly by Madame Shaddock.

Then he was stopped by a man he hardly recognized, the once-handsome face was so distraught. The man shrieked, "I didn't! I didn't!"

"Didn't what?" asked Chafik.

"I didn't kill Shaddock! *She* killed him!" Majib cried. "She knew I wouldn't marry her unless she had title to the estate. These old women! What they'll do—"

The Inspector stood tiptoe and, using the inside of his forearms, hit Majib, right, then left, on the side of the head. It was a merciless battering and when the youth collapsed, Chafik said with disgust, "The thing you've murdered is your manhood."

Beyond, Mr. Fahay sat alone at a table. The man from Basrah looked very old, and his olive-brown eyes stared into space.

The Inspector said, "You and I, Mr. Fahay, both perspire on a cool night; we are equally afraid." He went and stood at the table and his hands pressed the marble top for support. "You were very courteous to keep the appointment. However, I thought you would. You were very curious when we first met; you wanted to stay and watch me. I had to dismiss you."

The man from Basrah said nothing.

"I admire your quick thinking," continued Chafik. "The constable on patrol almost caught you drowning Shaddock, so you pretended you were making a rescue. And that rumor you spread in advance about suicide was excellently planned, although overdone. Of course, you knew Shaddock's confession would give you away?"

"He—he confessed?" The olive-brown eyes were dazed. "I—I don't understand. He wrote me he was going to, but said he'd wait—to give me a chance to get out of the country. I was sure I was in time to—" The bewildered mumbling

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stopped, and the man's eyes widened with knowledge of what he had admitted.

"How unthankful of you to kill such a thoughtful partner!"

"I had a fortune at stake!" cried the man from Basrah. "You devil! Satan's son!" he shouted and brought his hand out from under the table.

The Inspector looked into the eye of an automatic. His slight body blocked the marksmanship of Sergeant Abdullah, who by order had stopped at the café entrance. Chafik thought of Leila, of Faisal, of the long years behind him and the brief seconds before him.

He told Mr. Fahay, "The hangman can stretch your neck only once; therefore, secularly speaking, you lose nothing if you kill me."

Chafik watched the trigger finger tighten; there was a lump in his throat. He continued in strong voice, "But your soul, soon to go to God, is more complex than your neck. The Compassionate One might cleanse it of one killing, never of two. If you kill me, then for all Eternity your soul will suffer the Pit, sulphurous fires . . ."

The Inspector leaned heavily on the table; but he did not collapse until Mohammed Fahay turned the gun against himself.

When Chafik left the café, Madame Shaddock came to him and timidly touched his arm. Her face was hidden by the fold of the chuddar and she spoke in a humble voice. "You avenged my man—"

"Only God is vengeance," the Inspector told her.

"I drove him to his death with my foolish infatuation for Majib. What shall I do now?" she cried.

"Pray," said Inspector Chafik. "I too am going to pray for your husband, and for the one who killed him." He smiled in compassion and turned and walked away into the night.

The conclusion of

THE BET ON MISS RAINEY

by IRVIN S. COBB

"And be sure," Miss Rainey added, "to tell Mr. Watsworth to bring the key with him because there isn't any key here at the station house that will fit."

"Fit what?" I asked involuntarily, although a great light was breaking in on me.

"Oh, hasn't that terrible man told you yet? I'm *handcuffed!*"

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

Number Twelve in our new series of "first stories" . . . and a curious and subtle story it is, with a surprisingly sharp bite . . . The author informs us that she is "primarily a housewife and mother of four children, ranging in age from 15 to 3." She is in her mid-thirties, has a B.A. from Smith and an M.A. from Columbia in Comparative Literature. Her thesis won a prize—it dealt with the nature of Good and Evil in Cervantes and Dostoevsky, surely excellent preparation for the writing of mystery stories!

The idea for "The Way It Used To Be" popped into Mrs. Slater's head "at an odd moment [odd, indeed!], *while feeding or diapering" one of the children. What better plot origin for a busy housewife and mother? And certainly other story ideas will "pop" into Mrs. Slater's head . . . let 'em pop, we say!*

THE WAY IT USED TO BE

by ELAINE SLATER

THE PROFESSOR'S VOICE DRONED on and on in a clipped British accent. A fly, buzzing above her, hit himself repeatedly against the ceiling as if searching blindly for something.

What was it? Something Marilyn had forgotten was haunting her. What could it be? It lay stubbornly encased in her unconscious, refusing to stir. Why was it causing her so much anxiety. Damn!

"Miss Clayton"—her name startled her—"we have just discussed Macbeth's motivations in some detail. Would you care to expound on the motivations of Hamlet?"

"Well . . . as I see it, Hamlet's motivations were always cancelled out. What I mean is, he wanted to kill his uncle primarily because he hated him—that is, he was jealous of him. On the other hand, this violently powerful motive was cancelled out by his equally violent love for his mother and his desire not to hurt her. It was a kind of . . . well, a guilty love, I guess. Ummm, so that I would say that while Hamlet had very strong motivations which should have led him to direct action, instead of complementing each other, they nullified each other so that he was paralyzed."

"I see. Mr. Ellis, would you care to expand this theory for us?"

Marilyn was pleased with her-

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self. She had really pulled that off, and she hadn't half heard the question. But her pleasure was marred by the persistent nagging of that lost thought.

The bell rang. Class was over. Suddenly the shrill clanging released her hidden memories. *When the alarm rang this morning, she had arisen, dressed quickly, and got everything ready for breakfast. Dad was not down yet. She gulped her coffee and ran off to class. Oh, yes. There it was—not enough to have bothered her this whole hour. There had only been two places set at the table. She had noticed it without noticing it. Oh, well. It was really nothing after all!*

She grabbed her books and dashed off to Psych. She loved this course, and she was a favorite of the teacher who called on her constantly for the right answers. This morning's discussion was about the relative effects of heredity and environment. Miss Hazard was an excellent teacher.

"Scientists have debated this point for years," Miss Hazard said. "It has engendered such controversy that unfortunately it has invaded the realm of sociology, and even of politics. Hereditary or environmental traits are called upon to prove or disprove all sorts of diverse theories, but the fact is that we are still not at all sure of the exact part each plays in our ultimate make-up. Mr. Jessup, would you please give the class an example of a trait that you feel is purely hereditary?"

"Yes. I would say our appearance is purely hereditary."

"Mmmm, yes, perhaps. But has not our appearance been refined, and in some cases been drastically shaped, by environment? Need I remind you of the example of the giraffe? Miss Clayton, can you give us an example from your laboratory work that might indicate the effects of heredity or environment or both?"

This time Marilyn was ready. "Yes. If you took a baby rat away from one of its parents—its mother, I mean—and separated it from her by a glass wall, you would see some of the effects. I mean, the rat under normal conditions might have been friendly and calm, even while eating from the student's hand. But if you tear it from its mother, letting it see her but not reach her, it would become frustrated and its whole personality structure would change. It would snap at anyone who came near, possibly even stop eating. So you see, environment would have intensified and even distorted emotions that it had inherited, but which might have remained latent all its life under normal conditions."

"Have you made such an experiment, Miss Clayton?"

"No, but I've made similar ones, and I feel positive that I am right."

"A scientist never feels positive

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about anything," Miss Hazard replied kindly, "until she has made not one but indeed hundreds of experiments to substantiate a theory. However, your point is well taken, and I suggest you do a laboratory experiment such as you describe."

Marilyn was angry. *Of course she was right! And she had been in such a good mood when she left the house this morning. Why was it all being spoiled? She had slept well for the first time in ages, and everything had seemed wonderful. And now that thing about the table being set only for Dad and herself—why had it worried her? Everything was perfect. Dad was fine. She knew that because she had heard him come in late last night after the University Deans' meeting. He had gone straight to the study where he slept when he didn't want to wake his young wife. Marilyn had heard him, but her stepmother hadn't.* The bell rang.

It was too hot for field hockey, but that was what came next. So Marilyn headed for the locker room. She got into her gym things, cursing mildly when she missed her hockey stick. She dashed out onto the field late, incurring a black look from Miss Overbrook.

"Take your positions, everybody."

"Uh . . . I don't have a stick, Miss Overbrook."

"No stick! Where is it? How can you play without a stick?"

"I guess I left it home." *She was sweating now—it was much too hot for hockey anyway.*

"Home! What would you take a heavy hockey stick home for?"

"I don't know." Marilyn was truly puzzled.

"Well, we have no extras, so you might just as well get dressed again, and I shall have to mark you absent."

Marilyn was furious. *Why was this wonderful day turning out so badly? Oh, well, it was almost lunchtime. She'd get dressed and go home and have lunch with Dad. Just the two of them. The way it used to be.*

She ran all the way home.

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It is quite a long time since we have given you a **Black Mask** *type of story—but this one was worth waiting for . . . Here is a classic con game, with all its fascinating details revealed. Follow the play, move by move—until the sucker is ready for the big killing . . .*

THE CACKLE BLADDER

by WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT

THE LAST TIME I SAW PARIS, HE didn't look like this. He'd always been a snappy lad when it came to clothes and he'd never been at a loss for words, as they say.

This gloomy Monday I was sitting in Monte's, watching the rain hit the front windows and trying to find a mudder in the Form. I was low on scratch, and drinking beer when this—this apparition walked in, wringing wet.

I figured Monte would give him the heave, but good. Monte don't like no bums cluttering up the place.

But Monte just sighed and said, "Morning, Paris."

If this was Paris, I was Pittsburgh Phil. Then I looked more closely. No teeth in this wretch, pale as snow, wearing stinking rags, but it was Paris, all right.

I looked at him and thought of the last time I'd seen him. He'd been with Joe Nello, then, working the short-con together. Paris had taught the kid everything he knew.

He was looking at me now. "Hi, Jonesy," he said.

"Hello, Paris," I said, and nodded to the chair across the table. "It's been a long time. Sit down and have a drink."

He sat down, and Monte brought over a big tumbler of fortified wine. I knew then that Paris was on the way out. That comes just before your toes curl, fortified wine.

I took the chance and said, "How's Joe Nello?"

He wasn't looking at me; he was looking through me. "Would you really like to know?"

I nodded. "That's why I asked."

This is what he told me . . .

Joe and I, he began, were pretty thick, as you know. I mean, we worked all right together. I made the guy; he wouldn't have been nothing without me. He had the looks, sure, but he was kind of soft, you know, at first. He had a lot to learn about taking care of himself in this damned world.

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Times I was discouraged about Joe, but he knew what was important, really. I mean, down deep, he understood there's nothing like a few bucks to make people notice you. Lot of talk about the worthwhile things, but name me one you can't buy.

Anyhow, we were working Iowa with the short-con, everything from hog cholera tonic to three-card monte, and Joe was catching on. So many honest people in that state, they should have a closed season on the suckers. Begging to be taken, those rubes.

And the girls? They believe anything you tell them. *Anything.* Few tears when you leave them, but you don't always have to tell them you're going, not when you're on the move all the time.

We made a small pile in the tank towns and holed up in Des Moines for a while. We bought a convertible and enjoyed life. We didn't work the town; it's a wrong town. We just had ourselves a time.

That's where this Judith comes in. That's the babe that almost kept Joe from amounting to anything. I met her first, in the lobby of the hotel where we were staying.

She was a hostess for the tea room in the hotel, and in town on her own. Her folks had a farm about eighty miles into the tall and uncut.

She was maybe twenty-two, and slim, but not slim where she shouldn't be. She had blue-black hair and deep blue eyes. An innocent, if I ever saw one. But ready, I could tell. Bored, and ready.

She was sitting near the front windows, watching the traffic, a magazine in her lap, the first time I saw her.

I took a chair nearby and said, "Things can't be that bad."

She looked over, startled, and she smiled. She seemed about eighteen when she smiled. "Was I looking as bored as I feel?" she asked.

"I don't know how bored you feel," I answered. "Haven't I seen you around here before?"

"I work in the tea room," she said. "I'm the hostess. I went to school, and now I'm a hostess in a tea room and I can write testimonials for the school. I'm a success."

Then Joe came along. Her eyes went past me, and they seemed to come alive when she looked at Joe. He was staring, too.

He grinned then and said, "Is this gentleman annoying you, miss? And if he is, can I help him?"

Joe was going under the name of Jim Kruger at the time, and I said, "Jim, I'm sure you have something to do. There are lots of interesting things to do in this town. Goodbye, Jim, old pal."

"Now I know he's annoying you, miss," Joe said. "He has evil intentions, despite his age. And if there are so many things to do, can't we do them together?"

That crack about age wasn't so hot, I thought.

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Joe said, "Run along, now, Don, r I won't give you any more of my ld suits."

Sharpie, he was getting to be. I aid, "Why don't the three of us go ut together? Then the lady will e safe, and we'll all have a good me."

"All but me," Joe said, and ooked at her. "However, if that's he only way, I'm for it. You don't hink we're bold, do you?"

"I think you're fun," she said, 'and my sales resistance is at an all-ime low. I'm sold."

I never had a chance; this one was Joe's right from the start. We went to a spot on the edge of town where the lights were low and the liquor bonded.

They danced, and I drank. They danced and danced until you'd think Joe would develop a charley horse. Young they were, and graceful, and they danced awful close, but good. People gave them room, and some stopped to watch and this Judith ate it up and got flushed and prettier than ever.

Joe's old man had been a hoofer, and Joe had started dancing when he was four. He was really going good that night.

I drove, going back. The car purred along and I kept my eyes on the road ahead, and they didn't say anything.

In the room, while we were getting ready for the hay, Joe said, "This Judith, she's different, Paris."

"Not in any place I could notice," I said, "though my eyes aren't so good, now that I'm *old*."

"Aw, Paris," he said, "you know what I mean."

"I wish I did," I said.

"I mean, she's—she's a decent kid, and only a kid. She's different."

You see what I mean? I'd worked on the boy. He knew the difference between a wolf and a lamb, I thought, and now he gets all mixed up with a lamb who's ready and he's got to go soft. What could I tell him, if he wouldn't learn?

Love . . . How many pitches have gone wrong because some guys think it's love? Love's all right, if you want to call it that, but you don't have to buy a ring to prove it.

And that's what this punk meant to do. All the babes he'd run around with, and he's talking marriage.

"Her dad," he says one night, "has got three hundred and twenty acres of the finest corn land in Iowa, Paris."

"That's the guy you should be hanging around, not the daughter, then," I said. "Maybe we can touch him for a couple grand."

He didn't even seem to hear me. "She wants me to settle down. She wants me to take a winter course at Iowa State and learn to run those three hundred and twenty acres."

"That's the wrong side of the fence, Joe," I told him. "You're no yokel and you couldn't learn to be one."

He laughed at me. "What have

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we got? A couple grand. Small-time grifters, working the short-con. I could have done this good in the five-a-day."

I was glad then that I had the telegram in my pocket. Lou Pettle had sent it from K.C. and I hadn't shown it to Joe yet. I did, now.

He read it and said, "Lou Pettle . . ." like a yokel would say "J. P. Morgan." Lou was just as big a man, in his field.

"Lou Pettle," I agreed. "The biggest operator in the country. This is the chance we've been waiting for. This is where we move up, Joe."

He shook his head and blew out his breath. "A fortune. Lou Pettle. Golly, Paris."

"Well," I said, "are you going to buy the ring?"

He laughed and shook his head. Then he grinned at me. "But give me a couple days. Let me get her out of my system."

I couldn't blame him for that. He could have a lifetime without meeting another like Judith. I said, "I'll wire Lou we've some unfinished business, but to expect us."

He did buy a ring, though. Nice big Mexican diamond that must have cost him well over two bucks.

He spent most of the two days with her. She had a vacation coming and she took it, and where they went I couldn't swear to in court. I know I didn't see much of Joe.

Then, one afternoon, he comes into the lobby looking like a cat that has just polished off a quart of Grade-A. "When do we leave?" he said.

"Congratulations," I said. "Any time you're ready."

"Now," he said. "Judith's gone out to bring her dad to town. He wants to meet me." He seemed a little nervous. "We haven't got too much time."

We had less than that.

Joe was out getting the car gassed up when Judith comes into the lobby, this stout gent in tow.

He didn't look like a farmer. He looked like a banker—that's the kind of moola there is in that Iowa soil. She introduced us and asked, "Where's Jim?"

"He'll be back," I said, watching her face.

Her face was thinner, but her eyes were starrier than ever. Golly, she was a looker! I'll never forget it.

Her dad went over to buy a paper, and she said, "He will be back, won't he, Don? I suppose that's a silly question, but he's so . . . I mean, it's hard to believe, even now, that he's all mine. Oh, you must think I'm a perfect idiot. Only—"

"Easy, baby," I said. "Of course he'll be back. You go over and sit in that big chair, and I'll try and locate him."

She was trembling like a bride at the altar.

I got hold of him at the service station. I said, "You'd better steer

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lear of the hotel. There's no shotgun in sight, but there could be one around. I'll pack your stuff, and you pick me up near that restaurant where we ate the first day. Got it?"

I came out of the booth, and she was standing about five feet away. I walked over, and she put a hand on my arm.

"Don, there's something wrong."

"Nothing, nothing," I said. "Jim's trying to land a customer that will net us eighteen thousand dollars, Judith, and I'm not going to bother him now. He'll be here at six to clean up. Or, if you'd rather, he'll meet you at the Golden Pheasant. He's arranged a dinner for the four of us out there. He said this is the biggest evening in his life."

She smiled. "Did he say that?"

"His exact words."

Now she looked calm. "I'm going out and buy the nicest dress in town. We'll meet you here at seven, Don."

"We'll be here," I said.

They went out, and I went to the desk. I paid our bill and told the clerk, "Any mail that comes to either of us, you could send to General Delivery, in Kansas City."

He grinned at me. "Sure thing. Don't tell me Mr. Kruger is walking out on our Judith."

I was glad now we hadn't used our right names. All these squares work together.

I said, "Your memory isn't much good, is it?" I laid a twenty on the desk.

"I don't know from nothin'," he said, and that twenty just disappeared.

"Send for the cab, then," I told him, "and have the cabbie come up for our luggage."

Joe was waiting with the car in front of the restaurant, and we piled the luggage in the back.

Joe said, "How'd it go?"

"We're taking them to dinner at seven," I said. "Judy's out, buying a new dress."

Joe chuckled and shook his head. "Squares," he said. "Kansas City, here we come."

I was proud of him. I'd got him past this one, and I knew he wasn't going to get on the wrong side of the fence again. That was his graduation, you might say. From then on, I knew there was no danger of Joe getting simple. We were going places.

Two days after we started to work for Lou, I went over to the post office and picked up our mail. There wasn't much—a couple letters and a copy of the Des Moines paper. That was probably the clerk's idea, sending that paper along.

There was a picture of Judith on the front page. It didn't say it had been suicide. It just said she'd taken an overdose of sleeping tablets which had proved fatal. There was an unfounded rumor of an unhappy love affair, but neither of her parents would comment on that.

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She'd died clutching an immense imitation diamond ring in her left hand.

That's a square for you. I mean, he hadn't taken a nickel from her. As a matter of fact, he'd spent his own money on her and she hadn't lost a thing. What'd she have to beef about?

I threw the paper away. I didn't want to annoy Joe when he had his big chance, like this.

Kansas City was right. Lou was an operator and the fix was solid, and he ran enough steerers to keep him busy. Lou handled the inside, of course, and I watched him close. That's what I wanted, the inside job. That's where the moo was.

Lou had ulcers and was due to retire soon. I watched and learned, and we salted it, Joe and I. I rode the trains in from the West and he rode them in from the East, and Lou plucked them clean as a whistle, those marks we brought in to the store.

Store is just a con-name for the front we were using, an imitation bookie joint that could have been staged by a Broadway producer, it was that authentic. He had shills that looked like millionaires and he had shills that looked like playboys and shills that looked like retired farmers, but none that looked like shills.

Lou's ulcers got worse, and Joe and I began to take him out on parties, here and there, and raise hell with him generally.

Then one day Lou said to me, "Paris, I can't take any more. The fix is still solid, and the store is a mint, but a man has got to think of his health. You wouldn't be interested in the inside job, would you?"

"Not for me," I said. "I'm a simple, happy man."

"There's no one else could handle it in the organization," he said. "I wouldn't expect you to shell out; all I want's a percentage. And you'd be handling the money, Paris, remember. You'd get yours."

"And you'd get yours, with me handling it," I said, "but how much?"

We finally agreed on what I should send him. I argued so long he must have thought he was actually going to get it.

So we didn't use a dime of our money. We had seventy grand, Joe and I, in a joint account. That's how I trusted him.

Well, Judith had been one milestone, and this was likely to be another. The inside man, you know, is the boss and not always popular, because he's got the chance to knock down some personal moola at the expense of the others. If Joe and I got through this, we were solid; there wasn't any limit to the long green we could garner.

I knew that by now I could handle anything Lou had handled, and I didn't have ulcers.

It was Joe who brought me my first mark in the new job. Joe phoned me from the Alcazar and

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said, "Kind of a young guy, Paris. But he's got forty grand salted, right here in town. He wants to go into business here." Then he paused. "Husky, though. Might be rough to cool out."

"We'll use the cackle bladder," I said. "I've got a new poke already made and I'll send it over to you. I'll get a suite at that hotel, and you can bring him up right after lunch tomorrow." And then I said slowly. "No mistakes, though, Joe. The gang all think nobody can take Lou's place, and we've got to show them how wrong they are."

"Lou," Joe said, "was a piker and an amateur."

I got the best suite in the house and I was sitting in it the next afternoon, smoking a dollar cigar, when they rapped at the door.

I went to the door and opened it. I said, "Well?" sounding annoyed.

Joe said, "Are you Mr. Walters?"

"And what if I am? I suppose you—you gentlemen are reporters?"

"No, sir," Joe said.

"Well, then, speak your piece. You're selling something? A man purchases privacy, you know, when—"

"You've got us wrong," Joe said. "We're here to return something of yours, Mr. Walters, something we found in the dining room." He had the poke I'd sent over yesterday.

I threw the door wide open. "Gentlemen," I said, "forgive me. You've found my wallet."

While I said this, I was sizing up the mark. He must have been about twenty-six, a scrubbed-looking guy in a neat blue suit. He sure didn't look like forty grand to me.

"I *think* it's your wallet," Joe said. "You'd be willing to identify it, of course, Mr. Walters."

"A few hundred dollars," I said, "and some membership cards. One for the Pegasus Club, one for the Civic Betterment Club, a couple telegrams and"—here I paused—"and a code sheet."

Joe nodded and handed it over. "Correct, in all details. Mr. Walters, this is a recent acquaintance of mine, Mr. George Apple. And my name is Delsing, Carlton Delsing."

I shook their hands. "It's a distinct pleasure and a memorable occasion," I said. "I insist you have a drink on me."

"Don't mind if I do," Joe said, and Mr. Apple nodded and sat down. He wasn't missing a thing; he watched me like I was the President.

When I handed them their drinks, Joe said, "There was one thing you forget to mention, Mr. Walters. You mustn't be so modest."

I looked blank.

"That newspaper clipping in your wallet," Joe went on. "It described you as the Pittsburgh Phil of our era, the greatest plunger the track has ever known."

"Oh, that," I said. "You mustn't believe everything you read, Mr.

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Delsing." I smiled at him. "Income tax, you know. The less publicity, the better."

The mark sort of stirred in his chair. "You mean—this money you win isn't taxable? I mean, it really is, but you don't declare it. Isn't that dishonest, Mr. Walters?"

That wasn't good. A guy should have a little larceny in him to make the perfect mark. There's an old saw that you can't cheat an honest man. But this was important, this fish, and I barged ahead.

"Dishonest?" I said. "I have certain expenses, and the possibility of loss in other lines. Is it dishonest to build up a reserve against that contingency, Mr. Apple?"

"Well, no," he said. "I see what you mean. I'm all for the private enterprise system, myself, Mr. Walters, and I know that we have to protect ourselves against government greed, but, well, I mean—"

"We aren't under the private enterprise system at present, Mr. Apple," I told him coolly. "But there'll be a change, one of these days. There's got to be a change, or the system is dead." I sighed. "I don't worry about myself. I've made mine. This track plunging is a sort of hobby with me. It's the young people I worry about, the young lads with gumption enough to go out on their own."

He sort of flushed, as though I'd been talking about him, which I had.

I smiled at him and said, "What's your line of business, Mr. Apple?"

"Well, nothing right now." He sure was an easy blusher. "I came out of the service and bought some land in the Everglades. I put it all into celery, and I—well, I did all right. I put away forty thousand dollars in three years, and then decided to come up to Kansas City and get into business here. Mom's waiting down in Florida until I can get established up here."

"Beautiful climate, Florida," I said.

He nodded. "I liked it. But it's kind of hot for Mom in the summer, and that's one reason I'm moving north. If I don't find what I want here, I'm going up to St. Paul."

"Forty thousand of risk capital," I said, "is a nice little sum for a young man to have, and a war veteran to boot. You're one of a kind I thought was missing in America these days, Mr. Apple."

"I've always made my own way," he said, and looked at his hands. "I don't mind work, but I sure hate a time clock."

Now Joe came in. "Speaking of risk capital, Mr. Walters, I guess you've found a way to take the risk out of it."

I gave him a knowing smile. "I don't quite understand you, Mr. Delsing."

"That code sheet," Joe said. "I'm no gambler, but I've played the ponies enough to know a code tip when I see one."

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"You're an astute young man, Mr. Delsing," I said. "Have a cigar."

He shook his head, and Mr. Apple declined, and I changed the subject. "I was in Washington just last month on some legislation and . . ."

I went on and on, tossing the big names around, giving this punk a picture of corruption and finagling that was bound to turn his stomach. A veteran, see, and still with some old-fashioned ideas in him, and I had to make him see it wasn't cheating, keeping the money out of the hands of those power-mad, greedy, corrupt officials.

I had to get him partly on our side of the fence, and make him forget mama, sweltering down in Florida. I had to make the rube forget all those things Mom had told him.

They both listened, Apple politely, like he'd been taught, and Joe with evident irritation. Joe was starting the switch right then, the sense of allegiance from him to me. Joe was to be the goat, and the mark was going to have to dislike him, or the blowoff might go sour.

When I'd finished, Joe said impatiently, "To get back to that code sheet, Mr. Walters—"

The apple looked at him, and then at me. "I suppose we're prying, but that remark of Mr. Delsing's—I mean, am I to assume that some horse races are . . . fixed?"

"Some?" I smiled at him. "Quite a few. Though very few that I don't know about, Mr. Apple. I think I can honestly say there are none at the major tracks that I don't know about—and well in advance of the running."

The square jaw of this young mark was set, and I could see the wheels turning in his thick skull. He was remembering the picture I'd painted of Washington, and at the same time the fine words about my generosity he'd read in that newspaper clipping. Here I was, an esteemed man, and a wealthy one, not looking like a crook at all. I could almost see his ideas change.

He nodded, and his voice was quiet. "Well, as Mr. Delsing said, that certainly takes the risk out of it."

I puffed the dollar cigar and shrugged. I frowned and picked up my wallet. "Which reminds me, gentlemen. I'd like to give you a little token of my gratitude." I pulled out the three hundred from the poke. "This you won't need to declare in your income tax, and it might pay the hotel bill."

Both of them shook their heads, and Apple said, "It's enough of a reward for me just to meet a man of your caliber, Mr. Walters." He looked uncomfortable. "How do you know in advance which races are fixed?"

I smiled. "That's almost an impertinent question, young man. But if I'd lost that code, and those telegrams . . ." I took a breath. "I know in advance because I work

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with the organization that fixes them. As I said, it's just for fun, and most of the money I make goes to various charitable organizations. And it gives me an excuse to travel from town to town, seeing this country I love."

Now Joe said, "If you really feel indebted to us, Mr. Walters, we'll settle for the name of a horse."

"I'll do better than that," I said. "I'll make a small wager for both of you this afternoon." I rose. "And now, gentlemen, if you'll excuse me, I have to make a call to Washington. How about dinner tonight in the dining room here? I'll have your winnings with me."

"It will be an honor, Mr. Walters," Apple said. He was still looking thoughtful.

They left, and I stayed there, waiting for Joe's call. He called at three.

"You sold the jerk, I think," Joe said. "Made to order, isn't he?"

I thought of that square jaw and those wide shoulders, and a punk that could take forty grand from Everglade muck. I said, "He could wind up a beefer, Joe. He might be rough to cool off, once he gets a chance to think it over. It'll be the cackle bladder, for sure."

"Right," Joe said. "Mama's boy and I will see you at dinner. He's beginning to get bored with me already, after your personality, Paris."

At dinner I gave each of them a hundred and fifty dollars. I gave Joe a card to the Pegasus Club.

I said, "If you'd like to risk that capital again, gentlemen, this is as good a place as any. You won't be bothered with riff-raff."

Joe looked at the card, and Apple looked at the money, as though wondering if it was right to pocket it.

Joe said, "If we're going to wager, it would only be on your advice, Mr. Walters. Nothing I love more than a sure thing. But we won't ask any more favors."

I could see the apple was about to say something, but he must have changed his mind. He pocketed the hundred and fifty. I could see he was starting to simmer. This was better than celery.

Joe kept yak-yaking all through the meal, and I could tell the apple didn't like it. Joe can talk awful damned foolish when he puts his mind to it.

When we were finished, I excused myself. "I have a rather important engagement with Senator Cormack," I apologized, "or I'd break the date." I looked thoughtful. "It so happens I'm going over to the Pegasus Club tomorrow afternoon. If you're both there, I might have something for you."

Joe called me that night. "I've been telling him what a gang of racketeers these bookies are. I've got him convinced it wouldn't be dishonest to take advantage of them. He's getting to think he's Robin Hood, instead of Galahad."

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"I'll see you at the club," I said. "I think he's ripe."

Lou had really done a job on that Pegasus Club. It was a super-streamlined, high-class bookie joint that would have fooled anybody. And the shills could have stepped right out of the Blue Book. The wire service was the regular service—with one small change.

Lou had records made of the results as they came in, and it was the records that came out of the loudspeaker—a half hour after the race was over.

That way, if any mark happened to check the race results in the paper next day it would all be the quill.

I had the results of the third at Tanforan when the pair of them came in next afternoon.

The apple's eyes got big and bright when he saw the fancy company around. Some of them were lined up laying their bets, and the thousand-dollar bills were like push-notes in that big room. Old Judge Brewer stepped up and laid down a stack an inch high.

What the apple didn't know was that all the bills were singles on the inside. It looked like a good half million in cash being waved around that room; there was really about twenty thousand.

They came over to me, and I gave them the winner of the third at Tanforan. "He'll be odds-on," I told them, "so a small bet isn't going to do you any good."

"There's nothing small about me," Joe said. "I'm betting the whole hundred and fifty."

Apple's look was full of scorn. "Mr. Walters' gift. I'm willing to bet some of my own money on his word."

Joe looked away.

"I'm going to bet two thousand," Apple said, "of *my* money."

"Gentlemen," I said, "let's not quibble. The line is forming."

The announcement was coming through the speakers, and the winners of the second had been called off.

Joe managed to get in line before Apple did, shoving him as he did so, and not apologizing. It was a long line, but moving pretty well—until it got to Joe.

Joe mumbled and fumbled when it came his turn. The apple fidgeted and I could almost feel him burning. Joe finally stepped away from the window, and the cashier shrugged as the PA barked, "They're off!"

"Sorry, sir," the cashier said to the mark, "but the betting closes with that." He turned away and didn't even glance at the crummy two grand lying on the counter.

I thought Apple was going to swing on Joe right there. And when the horse came home, the horse I'd given him, I waited for the melee. He'd paid three for two and Mr. Apple had been stalled out of a fast thousand dollars.

He just stood here, white in the face for a second, and then he be-

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gan to use some language he must have picked up in the fields under that Florida sun.

Joe took it, and a few of the shills gathered around to see what was going on and the manager came over.

Horny Helmuth is the manager and he made it look like the McCoy. "I'll have to ask for your guest card, sir," he said quietly to Apple. "We don't tolerate that kind of language in the Pegasus Club. This is a gentlemen's club."

"Gentlemen?" the apple said evenly, "I can see that most of them are, sir, but I think you're making a mistake in this—this—" He couldn't finish.

"Mr. Apple," I said soothingly, "you have a just complaint, but I'm sure you didn't mean to lose your temper. You've been robbed of a few dollars, but there'll be other days."

Horny says, "These men are known to you, Mr. Walters?"

"I'll vouch for both of them," I said.

Horny practically crawled into the thick carpeting. "I—I didn't mean to intrude in a personal misunderstanding. I'm sincerely sorry, Mr. Walters."

He walked away.

Joe said, "I guess I am kind of jerk, at that. I only bet him to show. He certainly won't pay much to show."

"To show," I said, and smiled at the apple. "To show." I started to chuckle and slapped the apple on the back. "Isn't he terrific?"

The apple half grinned. He looked at Joe and then over at the windows where the Judge was collecting what looked like a quarter million, at least.

The apple said, "You'd better get over there, Mr. Delsing, before they run out of money."

We both got a laugh out of that, as Joe went to the window.

I said to Apple, "The pikers we will always have with us. The men who haven't the guts to take a risk. He's a good example."

Apple nodded. "Well, he's young, and maybe he never had to make his own way, like I did." He smiled. "I guess he'll never be bothered with income tax, like you, Mr. Walters."

"No," I said, "he sure won't."

Now the rube blushed again, and said quietly, "I—it's not right for me to ask it—but you wouldn't have another winner for today, would you?"

I shook my head sadly. "Not today, no." I frowned. "I—ah—shouldn't mention it. But call me this evening, around seven thirty."

He said humbly, "Thank you, sir. I certainly will."

"And another thing," I cautioned him, "don't antagonize your young friend. After all, Mr. Delsing does know about me now, and he could cause me some trouble in New York. I made nearly a million dollars in undeclared income last year,

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Mr. Apple, and it's not a source of revenue I'd relish losing because of a personal animosity. You can see how it is."

"I'll get along with him," he said. "I'll stay right with him and see that he doesn't blab to anybody. But I wish he wasn't always running everybody down."

"Including me?" I suggested.

"Let's forget it," he said. "I should shut up."

I shook his hand and left him. I was a little leary of his temper. We'd had some trouble with a couple of widows I'd brought in for Lou, and he'd cleaned them all the way, and the fix was kind of wary of any big beefs right now. Forty grand would make a big beef.

I knew how I was going to play him. He wouldn't need the big convincer; he believed in me now. I knew just how the "mistake" was going to be made, and how I was going to cool him out after the touch. Cooling him out right would save the fix a lot of trouble.

With a temper like young Apple's the cackle bladder was the only sure way.

He phoned at seven thirty, this Apple did, and I said, "Can you shake Delsing for an hour? I'd like to talk to you here."

He was over in ten minutes. I mixed him a drink and put him in chair away from the light. I wanted the light on me, so he could see how sincere I was.

I took a sip of my drink and looked at him for a couple seconds. "Tomorrow night I'm leaving for Denver. Tomorrow afternoon I'm hitting the Pegasus Club for the Allenton Stakes, and I'm hitting them hard. I don't think they'll be happy to see me after that. I've won quite a lot this past week and they don't like consistent winners."

He was staring at me. "You've got the winner of the Allenton Stakes tomorrow?"

"Not yet," I said. "But I'll have it in the morning. I'm not going to be a pig. I figure to bet fifty thousand, collect my winnings, and take the first train out."

"And make a big profit in a few minutes." He must have been thinking of the difference between this and a celery farm.

I nodded. "In cash money. Now, because of the—the unfortunate bungling of our mutual friend this afternoon, you were cheated out of a tidy sum. Mr. Delsing seems to be something of a piker, so I prefer not to tell him of this. However, I'll be glad to wager any amount for you that you care to. Frankly, Mr. Apple, young men of your stature are rare these days and I have a great regard for you."

He said softly, "But won't the organization find out about it if you bet more than you declare to them? Won't they be suspicious?"

"Of a few extra thousand? Why should they?"

He gulped and looked at me

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hard. "I—I wasn't thinking of just a few thousand. I was thinking of betting it all, the whole forty thousand. Then I could buy the kind of business I want."

I frowned. The phone rang, and I went to answer it. Joe was always a good man on his timing. He told me who he was and didn't say another word.

"New York?" I said. "I'll hold the wire." Then after a couple seconds, "Hello, hello—P.J.? I can hear you fine. Sure, everything's under control. How's your asthma, P.J.? Too bad. And the kids? Fine. No, no, not yet. Well, no later than noon. By the way, I'd like to take a little flyer myself on that one tomorrow. Need some traveling money, you know, and I eat pretty well."

A pause, a long pause, and I said, "Oh, maybe an extra forty or fifty."

Another pause, and I laughed. "No, not millions. I haven't got your kind of money, P.J. Okay? Thanks. It's a pleasure to work with you, P.J. Remember, it's Denver, tomorrow night. And my regards to your wife."

When I turned from the phone, I said, "That was New York. That was a man who really has trouble with his income tax."

"He said it was all right?"

I nodded. "Now, not a word of this to Delsing. He could spoil the whole deal, you know."

"Not a word," he agreed. "I'll stay with him. You'll be here the rest of the night, Mr. Walters?"

I nodded. "Why?"

"I'll want to phone you, in case Delsing gets out of hand. I wouldn't want him to cause you any trouble with his talk."

"Well," I said, "I'll be here." I finished my drink and shook his hand. "I'll see you in the morning, down in the grill."

He went out.

I checked my money, stacking it to look like fifty grand. I checked the revolver I'd inherited from Lou. It was clean and loaded—with blank cartridges.

I started to get sleepy, and I couldn't figure it. I don't usually hit the kip before two, and it wasn't even nine now. I was sound asleep by nine thirty.

I was still pounding the pillow at eight, next morning, when the phone rang. It was the apple, and he was waiting in the grill.

I told him I'd be right down.

Over ten hours, and I'd slept like a baby all through it. This one was working like a dream.

When I came into the grill, the apple looked unhappy. "I don't know where Mr. Delsing's gone to," he said apologetically. "You don't think he's out somewhere—"

"Shooting off his mouth? We can hope he isn't. I wish I hadn't given him that guest card to the club. You and he . . . quarreled?"

He nodded. "Nothing serious. He talks and talks and talks."

I sat down at the table. "Well, I'm

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not without influence in this town. It isn't as though we were cheating any honest citizens, you know. The authorities would like to see the Pegasus Club out of business." Which was no lie.

After breakfast we sat in the lobby for a while, and then I went with him to the bank. He drew out the forty grand, and we returned to the hotel.

We sat there, waiting for the code telegram that was going to make us our pile. He didn't have much to say. He'd sweated for that forty grand, and he might have been thinking of the risk, even on a sure thing.

The telegram came just before lunch, and I excused myself while I decoded it.

At lunch he said, "Well, Mr. Delsing hasn't appeared as yet. It looks like we'll be spared his company."

"It looks that way." I chewed my lip. "There's some trouble in New York. We may have to settle for second place today. We know what horse is going to finish second, and that should give us a reasonable return, if we bet to place, but I'm still waiting for word of the winner. Of course, it will depend on the final odds. The second place horse may even pay better. We'll see what develops."

Mr. Apple said earnestly, "All I expect is a reasonable return, Mr. Walters. It's very seldom a fellow gets a sure thing."

"We'll wait," I said, "and see."

We waited and waited and waited after lunch. Finally, I went to the booth and pretended to put in a call to New York. I really put in a call to Horny, at the club.

When I came back, I said, "We'll have to settle for second. I hope it's going to be all right with you, Mr. Apple, if we make only an ordinary profit today."

He nodded, watching my face.

I let him simmer for a few seconds, and said, "Honey Boy to place, and it's in the bag."

Outside, I gave the cabbie a twenty and said, "Don't spare the horsepower."

He didn't. We got to the Pegasus Club in five minutes and hurried up to the second floor.

The place was as busy as ever. They were calling off the entries for the Allenton, and the line was forming. At the board the results of races all over the country were being chalked up.

The line was starting to stretch out, and Horny was there, getting it orderly. He smiled at me and said, "Some of you aren't going to make it for the Allenton, I'm afraid, Mr. Walters."

I could see the impatience in the mark's eyes. I could see him remembering yesterday and how he'd been robbed of an easy grand.

His eyes moved along the line, measuring it, and then he said quickly, "There's Delsing, right up near the front. Do you think? I mean—"

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"Let him place it?" I asked. "Is that what you mean?"

Joe saw us and waved. I waved back and looked at the punk. "I guess we'll have to. I'll make it clear to him that he's not to increase his own bet too much. That wouldn't sit well with New York."

Apple said, "He hasn't got the money to hurt us. We'll just have to take the chance, Mr. Walters. Of course, it's really your decision."

I stepped out of the line. I had the apple's forty grand and my phony fifty. I handed it to Joe and said clearly, "Here's ninety thousand dollars. On Honey Boy, to *place*. Have you got that straight?"

"I certainly have," he said. "Only I'm going to add my hundred dollars to it now."

The apple and I went over to sit down. He had the shakes and his face was like snow. He said, "It's only justice that he helps us out now, after what happened yesterday."

Joe just made it. The PA started to bawl right after he left the window, bringing the tickets with him. He'd bought two, one for him and one for us.

He showed us his first. "I still haven't got the faith I should have, Mr. Walters. I bet him to place, for myself."

"For yourself?" I said. "How did you bet him for us? I said to *place*."

Joe looked stubborn. "You said straight, Mr. Walters."

I held my breath until my face was good and red. "I asked if you had it *straight*. But I distinctly told you to bet Honey Boy to place. You damned fool, you—"

My voice was loud, and Horny came over. "Gentlemen, gentlemen," he said quietly.

"Mr. Nelson," I said in a lower voice, "a mistake has been made and I'm sure it's not too late to correct it. I asked this young man to purchase a place ticket on Honey Boy, in the Allenton for me. He misunderstood and purchased one to win. I haven't that much faith in the horse. I'd like to exchange it."

Horny frowned and said, "There really isn't much time. However, for you, Mr. Walters—"

And then the call came over the system, and he smiled and said, "I'm afraid your request came just a few seconds late, Mr. Walters. Well, perhaps Honey Boy will win."

He walked away and I looked at Joe, and he backed away a step, looking belligerent.

"Ninety thousand dollars," I said. "Young man, that horse had better—"

Apple was white and talking to himself, and I thought he was going to hang one on Joe. Then the account of the running came, and we stood up. In the excitement I saw Joe slip the cackle bladder into his mouth.

It's a rubber dingus, you know, like a syringe, filled with blood, usually chicken blood, and it's the big part of the act.

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Honey Boy was leading at the five-furlong post, and he was going away, and the apple almost looked human for a change. I started to talk to myself, and then the challenge came.

Into the last turn it was still Honey Boy, but Velveteen was coming up now on the outside, making the big bid, and Velveteen was the odds-on favorite in this one.

Velveteen was moving, moving up, moving past, going away in first place as she hit the wire. It was Honey Boy second, paying a bundle to place.

I saw Apple look at Joe and start to get up, but I was there in front of him, and I had Joe by the neck, shaking him, and his face started to get blue.

The shills were hollering and Horny was making his way through the crowd, and Apple was trying to get in with a slug or two of his own.

I slammed Joe's jaw, and he went to his knees. I stepped back, pulled the gun from my pocket, and now the apple looked scared.

I fired three times, at point-blank range, and it made one hell of a racket in that noisy room. The chicken blood just squirted from Joe's mouth, and he crashed forward on his face.

A couple of the shills started hollering, "Police!" and Horny had me by the arm.

"My God, Mr. Walters, you've killed him! Here, follow me!" He turned to Apple. "You too, sir. This will ruin us." Now he had us both by the arm and was pushing through the room toward his office.

He closed the door behind him there and took us to another door, leading out the back way. "I wouldn't do this for anyone in the world but you, Mr. Walters. Go—hurry."

The apple and I clattered down the steps and through the short alley to the street. There was a cab waiting, one of our shills.

I put the apple in and handed him a couple hundred dollars. I said, "The Rockland Hotel, in Denver. Don't even go back to the hotel. I'll meet you there."

"But you—" he said, scared.

"I've got to see our local attorney," I said. "Remember, if I'm not there tomorrow, don't wire. I'll get in touch with you. Take a plane. Goodbye."

In Monte's, the rain was still hitting the front windows, and Paris finished his fourth glass of the fortified.

"Smooth as silk," I said. "You've got the touch, and you've got him cooled out and blown off. In Denver he gets a wire to go to Frisco, because the law is hot and he's an accessory. In Frisco he gets a wire telling him you're leaving for Europe to avoid the chair, because Mr. Carlton Delsing, alias Joe, is dead."

Paris was staring past me at nothing, the same thing he'd been staring at when he came in.

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"Joe was dead," he said, without looking at me. "He lived for two hours, and I didn't go up for murder, though I got quite a jolt. But he had three slugs in him—three slugs *I* put there." Now he looked at me. "My boy, you understand. I made him. I killed him."

Monte was listening to it all. Monte came over and filled Paris' glass. "On the house," Monte said.

"The mark," Paris went on. "That night in my room, while I was pretending to talk to New York, he drugged my drink. While I slept, he changed the bullets from blanks to real slugs. He knew enough about the big con to guess we'd use the cackle bladder. And Joe was the boy he wanted dead."

"But why?" I asked. "Forty grand he drops, and gets involved in a murder. Why?"

Paris reached a dirty hand into a pocket and pulled out a torn, much-folded piece of paper that had once been a letter. I read:

Dear Grifter:

You'll want to know why, and maybe you won't remember back those years to Des Moines—and Judith. But I'll remember her. That wasn't Florida money I flashed, that was Iowa money, from selling my farm. I knew Judith since she was twelve and we were engaged before your buddy came along. She sent me a picture of him when he gave her that phony ring, and I studied it a long time until I knew it. I learned the big con from Mike Joaquin, and I rode the trains for a long time waiting for the guy in the picture to pick me up. I figured you'd use the cackle bladder, and I was glad he was the outside man. Because you made him, grifter, and you should destroy him.

"A nut," I said. "Forty grand, just because he was sold on the dame. Of all the lop-eared—"

But Paris wasn't listening. Paris' head was on the table; the fifth glass of fortified was empty near his dirty outstretched hand.

The rain was letting up a little, and I went back to the Form, trying to find a mudder.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **CYRIL HARE**

TITLE: ***The Boldest Course***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: England

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *It was just as simple as this: there was no room in Saunders' life for both Maggie and Mary . . .*

TO COMMIT A MURDER ON A BANK Holiday at a popular seaside resort in broad daylight argues a good deal of courage, of a sort; but courage was the one good quality in which Jack Saunders was not deficient.

In fact, when he began to make plans for the elimination of Maggie, he soon realized that, as so often happens, the boldest course was the safest.

In some ways he genuinely regretted the necessity of what he was about to do, but once he had recognized that Maggie was an insurmountable obstacle to his career, he firmly put any useless regret to one side.

A phrase from a bit of poetry learned by heart at school—that must have been in his last term before he was expelled—came faintly back to his memory. Something about rising on stepping stones of our dead selves to higher things. It seemed oddly appropriate—with this important difference, that it was on the stepping stone of Maggie's dead self that he proposed to rise.

As to the higher things—they, of course, were represented by Mary Rossiter—Mary and her money and her absurdly gullible family, who had taken him at face value and accepted him as Mary's fiance without making the smallest inquiry into his past. Saunders could not but grin when he thought of the Rossiters.

They would be sailing back to Australia once they had seen their daughter wedded to the gentlemanly Englishman who had been so kind and useful to them during

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their visit to the old country. They were in Paris now, buying Mary's trousseau, and he was to join them there for a little holiday—at their expense, of course.

Once the wedding was over, they would not trouble him, but Maggie would—Maggie with her prison record as a sneak thief and pickpocket and, what was worse, her knowledge of his own prison record.

It has been all that he could do to keep her in the background while he was cultivating the acquaintance of the Rossiters. Already she had tried a little gentle blackmail. Decidedly, there was no room in his life for both Maggie and Mary.

And so to Bank Holiday, the day on which Saunders was to sail to meet the Rossiters in Paris, the day which was to be Maggie's last.

To all appearances, nothing could have been more innnocent than the little jaunt to the seaside that he proposed, and with which Maggie, who had been pestering him for his company for some time, fell in so readily.

Nothing more innocent than the elderly car in which they pottered in an endless string of other elderly cars along the road to the coast that morning. (Somewhere a family was wondering what had become of their car, which they had incautiously left unattended in the West End overnight. It had fresh number plates now and a skillfully altered license.)

Nothing more natural than that the drive should have ended on the downs overlooking the harbor where the Channel boat was making ready to sail. And if the couple in the car chose to recline on the back seat very close in each other's arms, well, could anything be more natural than that?

There was a sharp breeze blowing in from the sea across the top of the hill, and the car was only one of dozens parked nearby, occupied by other couples similarly employed.

A flight of jet aircraft screamed overhead. Under cover of the sound Saunders slipped out of the car.

By the time the heads and eyes of the throng of holidaymakers had turned from following them, he was yards away, an inconspicuous unit in the mass, making his way down a cliff path toward the sea.

It had been extraordinarily easy, he told himself—so easy that he felt almost apologetic toward the girl who had allowed herself to be snuffed out with so little trouble.

She had guessed, as he had expected she would, that this Bank Holiday outing was in the nature of a farewell; but, as he had not expected, she had not made a scene when she realized it.

It was the only respect in which things had not gone exactly according to plan.

He had braced himself for a quarrel, but there had been none. The foul-mouthed little thief had been sweet forgiveness itself.

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She had only asked for a last kiss. And what a kiss! Saunders' lips still tingled with it as he strode nonchalantly along.

Which, of course, had made things childishly simple. A commando training in unarmed combat qualified a man to do harder things than squeezing the life out of a girl already limp and helpless in one's arms. It was simply a matter of remembering one's instructions about pressure points . . .

All the same, it was a pity. Maggie must have loved him after all. Mary would never learn to kiss like that. Perhaps he had been wrong and could have kept them both. For a moment Saunders wondered whether it had been right to murder Maggie.

Still keeping up his unhurried stroll, Saunders approached the harbor. He had worked to a careful timetable, and like everything else on this successful day it fitted perfectly.

The boat-train was just coming in. A flood of chattering tourists surged toward the Customs sheds. Saunders allowed himself to be caught up in the crowd and waited patiently as it marshalled itself into the inevitable queue.

Slowly now, step by step, they moved forward, jostling, laughing, bumping one another with their suitcases and haversacks. Somewhere ahead a tired voice was chanting, "British passports this way! Have your passports ready, please!"

It was not until he had nearly reached the barrier that Saunders felt in his breast pocket—felt once, twice, and yet again in desperate unbelief. Then he fell out of the queue and began to go through all the pockets in his suit, in vain.

He tore open the little handbag that he carried and found nothing there but his things for a night or two away from home.

"Have your passports ready, please!" the voice repeated just over his head. "British passports this way!"

A long time after, it seemed to Saunders, another voice closeby said to him,..

"Lost your passport, sir? That's a bit of bad luck. Perhaps you had your pocket picked? It happens here sometimes, you know."

Saunders nodded dumbly. He could still feel Maggie's arms as they went tenderly round him in that last, close embrace.

"Afraid you can't go on board without a passport," the voice went on. "Spoiled your holiday, I'm afraid. But I shouldn't worry too much, sir—just give the particulars in at the office. The police will find it all right."

And sure enough, they did.

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THE FACES OF DANGER

by RUFUS KING

(continued from page 20)

An hour later at Memorial, Dr. Julius Camp was ready with a preliminary report for Stuff. Lyle Dasher, having been lavishly pumped out and given tranquilizing medication, was installed in a private room under observation.

"No," Dr. Camp was saying to Stuff, "there is no doubt but that it was poison of some character. But what? It's something definitely offbeat. Until the lab tests come through my only guess is that it's one of the alkaloidals."

"Not stone crabs?"

"No, no botulism, not food poisoning, and still—"

"And still what, Julius?"

"Damn it, Stuff, I don't know! Anyhow, he's no longer in danger. He'll be weak as a kitten and pretty flat on his back for a couple of days."

"Tell me this. Was it something he swallowed rather than an injection? Or," Stuff added thoughtfully, "perhaps a bite? A sting?"

"No, it was something he either swallowed or chewed."

"Chewed? Like gum?"

"Like anything you chew and then spit out. It had a slight reaction on his lips."

"Any idea as to the time he chewed it?"

"None. Not until it's identified. But I doubt whether he got it at dinnertime. During lunch seems more probable. That is only a guess, mind you."

Stuff left the hospital and returned to the Seahorse Towers Motel where without much information-digging he got in touch by telephone with a Mr. Lud Marbleton, owner and editor of *Flash*, the Bushing, Massachusetts weekly paper. Mr. Marbleton was helpful. In a pleasant Boston-flavored voice he gave Stuff several interesting facts about young Mr. Muscles.

Bushing was Herschel Pompey's hometown.

Herschel, his candor-blue eyes notwithstanding, had a criminal record. He had served seven months in the penitentiary for aggravated assault. Released last year, he had been a model citizen of Bushing, working with diligence in the Wilburforce filling station.

A younger sister named Estelle, whom Herschel had taken care of since their parents' deaths, was understood to require an operation in the near future. A more immediate note about the young lady was that she had left Bushing two days ago to join her brother down south.

The child-saving episode had

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been no spray of mullarkey on Madame Alcott's part. That is, on the surface. It had indeed taken place about one week prior to Herschel's arrival at Miss Bellington's as a deaf-mute.

But under the surface? Herschel had just "happened to be passing by" when the child had teetered on the brink. The child and couple had immediately driven on to some "destination unknown." They had come from some "unknown point of origin." Their name was simply "Smith."

Had the performance been deliberately staged to offset any later check-up? By a Mr. Galli who the following day had "happened to be driving through Bushing," and had been philanthropically agitated by the local hero's tragic reward of deaf-muteness and had offered Herschel, as solace, his current job with the B. Foundation?

If, Stuff decided, a man were to accept that three-way stretch in the long arm of coincidence he should seriously consider having his head examined.

Stuff's next telephone call was to the State Attorney, Phil Black. He oriented Black on the matter of Woodberry Jones, with the result that certain policies and strategies were agreed upon with a view toward safeguarding the Governor's pilitical good halth and, also, good Miss Bellington's physical good health . . .

Dawn slid its pistachio streamers across the sky, the sun rose in splendor, and in the day's brightening light Stuff again searched the vicinity of the gazebo for the peculiar weapon that had been used to garrote Jones. The palm trunks with their draperies of Mexican flame vine, the hibiscus, the general mesh of subtropical foliage defied him. The search was a bust.

Lucille arose at eight.

Lavender, her Bahamian maid, appeared with a breakfast tray, a copy of the *Halcyon Sun,* and a potpourri of pithy remarks uttered by Chef Friggoni on the blistering outrage of his stone crab entrée having been linked by Mr. Dasher with his stomachache. "He," Lavender concluded the recital, "resigns."

"I know," Lucille agreed absently. "He always does. Ask him to do one of his cheese soufflés for lunch."

Lavender left.

Lucille poured coffee, dipped into the rosy half of a chilled papaya, and took a look at the *Halcyon Sun*. On Page 5, tucked beneath an old family-secret recipe for key lime pie that involved the daring use of a can and a *half* of condensed milk, a curt item covering Mr. Jones's demise gave Lucille a sense of utter puzzlement—and a sudden chill. She tore the item out, bypassed a pair of patient eggs and a rack of toast, and left the house, heading for Griptread Tires.

She found Lyle a limp invalid

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and suffering a bland-type breakfast in the patio. Their greetings as two young people who were betrothed and, hence, in love, was a good bit under par—just an automatic exchange of chaste pecks.

"Lyle," she said with no preamble, "I'm worried sick. Read this."

Lyle shoved a repulsive bowl of predigested wheat to one side and read the item covering Woodberry Jones's death as it had been released to the press, after a filtering process arranged by Stuff Driscoll and Phil Black.

Jones, Lyle read, a hitchhiker from the north, was believed by the police to have been accidentally killed when attempting to hold up an unidentified motorist who had stopped to give him a lift. It was believed that the motorist, realizing the man's evil intention, had struck Jones a judo punch on the throat, knocking him backward as he attempted to force his way into the car, and had then sped on.

"Well?" Lyle said. "What about it? Who's Jones?"

"Jones," Lucille said, "is the face I saw yesterday morning in the bougainvillaea and he's the man those sirens were about last evening in the boxthorn."

Lyle's brow creased in a manly frown. "I still don't understand why you should be upset?"

"It's because of Mr. Driscoll."

"That Sheriff's man?"

"Yes. He ordered me not to speak about it to anyone, especially not to reporters. Of course, you're different. He was practically in a lather, and he said the fate of our Foundation may depend on my keeping silence."

"He must be off his rocker."

"No, he isn't, and he wasn't tight. This item is nothing but camouflage to cover the truth. That man was murdered. And you were deliberately poisoned. Lyle, dear, use your head. Can't you see that this is serious?"

"Yes, but I still don't get it. Why?"

"I don't know why, but I'm sure it's connected somehow with the Foundation. Lyle, that murdered man, the attempt on your life—don't you think we ought to give the project up? At least, until Mr. Driscoll finds out what the trouble is?"

Lyle momentarily discarded his limp invalidism and became his strong dependable self. "Look, dear," he said, capturing one of Lucille's hands protectively, "perhaps there is something behind all this, but we must be sensible. Give the project up? Shelve it, even? *Think,* dear! Don't you realize that the amount of planning and money that has already gone into it?"

Lyle tabulated the Foundation's present status: the Auditorium booked and already sold out for the "Revels Humane"; the publicity already released; the sponsors—civic organizations, service clubs, the Governor, etc.—already in-

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volved; the donations pledged.

"How could we chuck all that," Lyle asked reasonably, "just because some stranger lurked in your grounds and later tried to hold up a motorist? As for my being poisoned, even Dr. Camp at Memorial couldn't determine what the stuff was. I still say it was a plain case of fish poisoning."

"But Mr. Driscoll and his dramatics? About the Foundation and any bad publicity, I mean?"

"I'll have a talk with Mr. Driscoll," Lyle said. "I'll tell him how you feel, and insist on some straight answers. Doesn't that make more sense?"

Lucille admitted that it did.

3 p.m.

Chimes.

"Good afternoon, dear friends. This is Molly Newhouse and I have two very *special* guests today who . . ."

The TV interview hit the airways with the zombie overtones usually inherent in such horrors and the only note of importance to this fable occurred when the broadcast was over and Lucille and Herschel had returned home.

They went to the terrace for a quarter hour of relaxation from the strain, the lights, the general nerve-wrack of the studio. A couple of cool tall ones supplied by Hopper put them in the mood in which confidences shimmered in the mimosa-scented air. Romance again spread rosy fingers across Lucille's frayed nerves.

The warmth in her chest rose several decibels while Herschel confided via note-writing about his sister Estelle's precarious health, their status as orphans, and modest hints at his big-brother protectorship. He indicated just how much this present job meant to him, now that deaf-muteness had cut him off.

It was the look on Herschel's face, the blue-candor in his eyes, that clinched Lucille's determination that the Foundation must go on no matter what—much more convincingly than Lyle's coldly factual rationalizations.

Impulsively she wrote in the notebook an assurance that his sister would have her operation by the finest specialist, with an arrangement (worded so that Herschel could not take offense) that Bellington papayas would foot the bill. She did not wait for a reply, for any mutual embarrassment involving expressions of gratitude, but left Herschel on the terrace and ran into the house.

It is agreeable to note that the *fanfaron* in Herschel was touched, deeply touched, by this warm-hearted gesture of Lucille's. Sadly, however, it must also be admitted that Herschel still remained toughly the *fanfaron*. He took a newspaper from a taboret beside the bamboo chaise and earmarked a report for a later note-trapping of Lucille,

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even though his heart was now only half in the job.

The report concerned a General Mendoza Conti, a South American ex-dictator then in exile in Miami, who had just been served with an extradition warrant by a United States Marshal. The charges listed against him by his country were embezzlement and murder. General Conti intended to carry the extradition case into the Federal courts. Should he lose it and be deported into the hands (with guns in them) of his compatriots, he would be a dead duck.

Philosophically, Herschel pondered the general's plight—how punch drunk with power could a guy get? These musings were shortly interrupted by Madame Alcott who swept him into a Bellington car and off for an appointment with Halcyon's portrait photographer, a bearded bruiser named Adford Burnes. The thought was a group of stills of Herschel, the best one of which would muscularly cheesecake a poster for the "Revels Humane. . . ."

The activities of Stuff Driscoll at this hour involved a call at Griptread Tires, upon Lyle's telephoned request. Stuff joined the convalescing invalid in the patio and gave Lyle a polished runaround with no factual information as to the true background of the investigation. He left Lyle in a state of frustrated satisfaction—the word foggy would best describe it.

Stuff's next port of call was Dr. Vic Young, the Assistant Medical Examiner. Here, too, a measure of fogginess prevailed. The tests were still going on—the nature of Lyle Dasher's poisoning, the peculiar residue traces left in the groove of strangulation on Jones's throat, and the fingernail scrapings where Jones's hands had clawed the object used as a garrote.

Dr. Young did admit, however, that one conclusion had been reached: whatever the nature of the cord used to garrote Jones, it had definitely been in contact with some variety of vegetation.

"Like raffia or something used for tying up shrubs?" Stuff asked.

"Could be. We're calling in some outside help from the University of Miami—Dr. Larson of the Medical Research Unit. We're also getting in touch with Mrs. Julia Morton of the Morton Collectanea."

Lucille, temporarily abandoned by Herschel and Madame Alcott, was by no means at a loss for something to do. Still vaguely on Cloud 9 after her session with Herschel she retired to a cabana and rigged herself for a pot of skin diving—a diversion at which both she and Lyle were adept.

An hour went by in subaqueous beauty, in the silent fairyland of opalescent décor, coral jewelry, and friendly fish that lie beneath the surface of the sea, and as always the experience refreshed her, giv-

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ing her anew that calm outlook on life so inherent in her nature.

This outlook, however, received something of a shock after Lucille had dressed and gone into the Lisbon Den to attend to her social correspondence. It was Hopper who administered the jolt by coming in and announcing, "A Miss Estelle Pompey is calling, Miss Bellington." He added noncommittally, "With luggage."

"Luggage?"

"An overnight bag and a suitcase. The taxi driver deposited them in the entrance hall."

A bit confused—but after all it *was* that decibel-inspiring young man's soon-to-be-operated-on sister—Lucille said, "I think the Seville Suite, Hopper. Put the bags in it after you show Miss Pompey in here."

A couple of whys fluttered around while Lucille waited. A sudden attack? An emergency operation imperative? Naturally the girl had no one to turn to other than her brother . . .

Estelle Pompey, ushered into the Lisbon Den, could easily have posed as the very picture of Health. But such outward bloom is often deceptive, as any reputable diagnostician well knows. There was a sturdiness about Estelle, a clean, fresh look about her face, a face dotted with the same type of candor-blue eyes that dotted her brother's, to which Lucille took an immediate liking.

"Estelle, dear, I'm glad you came," Lucille said with a warm smile. "You're very welcome."

"I'm afraid just barging in like this—"

"But I'm *glad* you've come. Tell me, is it serious?"

"What?"

"The operation."

"Oh, you thought—oh, no, Miss Bellington—"

"Lucille."

"Lucille. It isn't that. I mean there's no rush about that. They say not for a month or two."

"Look here, Estelle. Take your jacket off and sit down. Tell me what's bothering you, then I'll get you settled in your rooms."

"You're awfully kind. Really kind. I'm worried sick about Herschel. I just *had* to come."

"Herschel? Why?"

Estelle, whose nature was a good deal similar to Lucille's, did not beat around the bush. "A year ago he had a little trouble back home. Did he tell you about it?"

"No."

"He hit a man. He's very strong. The man almost died, and Herschel was in prison for seven months. He hit the man because of me. The man was—that is, was about—"

"But of course your brother would!" Lucille exclaimed indignantly, as her thoughts clothed Pompey in the shining armor of the *parfait gentil* knight.

"He'd do anything for me."

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"I'm sure of it. But what's worrying you now?"

"This job he's got. This Foundation racket."

"Racket!"

"That's what I had to make sure about—that it's on the level."

"But my dear Estelle—!"

"Oh, please, it's not you—not you personally. But Herschel told me just as he was leaving with Mr. Galli that I was not to worry. He had to write it down, of course. Here, I'll show you."

Estelle took a note from her handbag and gave it to Lucille. Lucille read: *You're not to worry—this job will cover the works—you'll have the best knife juggler in the country, Dr. Harvey himself.*

"Don't you get it?" Estelle said. "Dr. Harvey's fees start around two thousand dollars, and how could my brother earn that sort of money on this kind of job? Unless."

One would think that any common-sense answer to this question would shake Lucille badly. But being Lucille, and having placed her trust in Herschel, it could not. "There's an explanation," she said. "I'm sure of it."

"So am I, Lucille, and I'm afraid of it. That's why I came down. I don't want my brother to get into any more trouble, even for my sake."

"I'd feel the same way, Estelle."

"You're sure there's nothing queer? No *angle?*"

"About the Foundation? Estelle, dear, be sensible. How could there be?"

Estelle told Lucille just how there could be. It could be used as a front for a variety of undercover doings: a land grab racket; a mask for subversive activities; a tract of land to which no possible suspicion could be attached, and yet would be used as a base for plane and truck takeoffs in dope running, arms running, alien smuggling. "Things like that," Estelle said. "I've been thinking about them."

Lucille was in the process of explaining exactly how ridiculous it was when Herschel came in with the muted effect of a leashed atmospheric disturbance. He went directly to Estelle (Hopper had informed him of her arrival), seized her hands and looked a question. Then he handed her the loose-leaf notebook and the pen.

Lucille observed the interchange of writings, while sensing the strong bond between these two with its flavor of dominance by Herschel and devoted submission by his sister. She noticed a look of gratefulness touch Estelle's face, a slight quivering of her lips.

"Lucille, it's all right," Estelle said after the final written exchange. "It was Mr. Galli who promised it to Herschel—the kindness of Mr. Galli's heart, and Herschel tells me that you—too—"

Estelle broke down at this point and indulged in tears.

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The evening was uneventful up until midnight, that traditionally fatal hour so agreeable to witches and foul deeds, and Herschel's movements were darkly in tune. He left the house, satisfied that its occupants were sleeping, and walked to the gazebo through the moon-pallid night.

He deposited under the cushion of the rattan settee the evening's batch of loose-leaf notes, which included indignant ones written by Lucille in reference to the South American ex-dictator now exiled in Miami.

"I think that about finishes it," the voice said from its point of origin in the hibiscus. "Don't bother fishing for anything more."

"All right. But I think there is something you should know. My sister. She's here."

The voice said after a pause, "Why?"

"She was worried about me. She figured there was something phony about the Foundation."

"She knows something?"

"She knows nothing! I've convinced her that everything is on the up and up. Miss Bellington has convinced her too. She's sold."

"Miss Bellington—then your sister has expressed her doubts to Miss Bellington?"

"I was out with Madame Alcott when Estelle arrived at the house. There's nothing to worry about. I'm going to ship her home tomorrow."

"Yes," the voice said thoughtfully, "that might be best. Are you certain you can make her go back?"

"She does what I tell her."

"Then—good night."

"'Night."

Herschel left the gazebo. He had scarcely taken more than a few steps along the path toward the house when his nerves were twisted with severe shock. Estelle stood facing him, blocking him, all pale violet and shadowy in the violet moonlight.

She was about to speak, with his name just reaching her whitened lips, when his hand clamped over her mouth and lifting her off her feet her ran with her to the terrace, to the pathway to the cabanas, then down to the beach where their voices would be blocked out by the surges of the rising tide.

There was nothing exceptional about the following morning. No sign in the sky, not one of those portents so dear to the hearts of the superstitious citizens of ancient Rome, no raven bird or howling of a werewolf-nurtured dog deterred Lucille from getting up at seven o'clock.

She went to the door of the Seville Suite, rapped, and entered.

"Estelle? It's I, Lucille."

Estelle's voice answered from the bedroom. "I'll be right with you, Lucille."

"I came to take you for a swim before breakfast. All right?"

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"Fine."

"You're sure you feel up to it?"

"Of course. I take one every day at home."

The ocean was cooperative, the waves being what the weather reports designate as from 1-3 feet, the wind southeast at 7 miles per hour, the sky partly cloudy, the temperature of the water 82°.

The girls stood for a moment at tide's edge. Lucille felt a change in Estelle, a sense of strain. She seemed different from the girl of yesterday.

"I seem to do everything suddenly," Estelle was saying. "Like just landing here out of the blue. Well, I'm leaving just as suddenly, Lucille. Herschel has made a reservation for me on this afternoon's flight for Boston. I'll take a bus up to Bushing from there."

"But, Estelle!"

"There's no reason for my staying. I understand things now, and I'm needed at home." Estelle added almost curtly, "Let's swim."

They swam out past the sandbar with easy strokes, and after a while Lucille turned on her back and floated effortlessly on the swell. She closed her eyes. She tried to puzzle out the oddities in Estelle's behavior—the strange decision to go home had a quality of brusqueness.

Lucille opened her eyes on the empty surface of the sea.

Empty.

From shore to the horizon. From north to south, east to west.

She called out, subconsciously knowing the futility of it, "Estelle! Estelle!"

Lucille circled the area with swift strokes and a heartbeat that neared panic. She knew these waters both on their surface and below—how the vagaries of a current would carry a body off in indeterminable directions.

She swam ashore and ran with constricted lungs to the house. Her memory for numbers was good and she recalled the one Stuff Driscoll had given her for the Seahorse Towers Motel.

When his answering voice came over the wire, she said, "It's about Mr. Pompey's sister, Mr. Driscoll. We were swimming out beyond the bar. I floated for a while with my eyes closed and when I opened them she was gone."

"I'll be with you in ten minutes," Stuff said.

The body was found an hour later, washed ashore a little to the north of the Bellington beach. A fisherman, surf-casting, came on it in the swirl. Shortly thereafter, Stuff took charge.

How can one compress, as they seem to have been compressed, those morning hours teetering between speed and lethargy? The most desperate hour for Lucille was the one spent with Herschel, and their writings in the loose-leaf notebook:

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Lucille: *I blame myself. I feel you must always hate me. It was I who suggested we take a swim.*

Herschel: *Don't be like that. I couldn't hate you. You couldn't help it. She always swam plenty. She was like a fish.*

Lucille: *If only she had cried out, but there wasn't a sound. I might have saved her.*

Herschel: *Even if this hadn't happened the odds were stacked against her. A 20 to 1 shot, they said. This brain operation stuff—*

There was more along the same line and what happened after a while of it was one of those things for which no academic explanation seems acceptable. They were alone on the terrace in the canyon shade of a poinciana tree, and each was keyed up to a strong emotional pitch. This kindness of Herschel in suppressing his own bitter grief and attempting to allay her misery of self-recrimination was more than Lucille could bear. She started to cry, helpless crying, the sobs shaking her.

Herschel lifted her and held her close. Then the roughness of his cheek, then the painful and fierce pressure of his lips . . . and during the strange ecstasy of that short moment a thought bedeviled Lucille's mind: this must not be; I am betrothed to Lyle Dasher.

An hour later Lucille and Lyle faced each other in the Griptread Tires patio. The whole thing had been too much for her. Jones's murder—Lyle's poisoning—Estelle's death—the miasma of evil that hovered above the Foundation—her crazy-mad newfound love for Herschel, pushed out of sight but blazing in a secret of desperation. She couldn't take it.

She was, she told Lyle, stepping out. Out of the Foundation. Out of everything.

Lyle's reaction was perfectly normal. He suggested that she was hysterical, which to a measure Lucille certainly was. He insisted quietly, in his down-to-earth fashion, that she should not, must not selfishly think only of herself. He, Lyle, was involved. The Governor was involved. Any number of people and organizations were involved.

It worked. Lucille agreed to go home and take a sedative. Then perhaps by the next day she and Lyle could come to a clear decision.

There was a different sort of conversation between Stuff and Dr. Vic Young. The report on Estelle suggested murder: marks around the ankles indicating that she could have been pulled under; throat marks indicating that she could have been throttled; and no water in the lungs. But the press release on the matter would officially be: the unfortunate accidental death by drowning of a visiting guest.

"As for the Jones and Dasher tests," Dr. Young said, "we may have an answer for you sometime this evening."

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At the conclusion of dinner, Madame Alcott went over to Griptread Tires to confer with Lyle on final publicity for the "Revels Humane." In Madame's book, come stomach upsets, drownings, or what have you, the show, in terms of her pet cliché, must go on.

As for Lucille and Herschel, each wanted the other's company, yet each was afraid of it. Neither, violently, cared to be alone. They had coffee in the Granada Room and the silence of the night pervaded the chamber like a physical thing. It was surcharged with their emotional tensions, with the fluid interchange of love and grief.

Lucille wrote in the notebook tentative suggestions as to arrangements about Estelle. Would Herschel care to have her placed at rest in the Bellington vault until he would accompany her north for burial with his people? Would he care to have a service held here by the Reverend Osgood Spanker?

I don't want to think of things, Herschel wrote. *I feel funny about things—mixed up—*

Then Hopper came in. He carried a portable telephone which he plugged into an outlet near the coffee table. He said, "A Mr. Galli is calling, Miss Bellington."

Chill sifted in the air and Mr. Galli's voice held an unpleasant Sicilian purr.

"Miss Bellington?"

"Yes?"

"I must ask you not to be alarmed at what I have to say."

"Alarmed?"

"It is imperative that I see you this evening on a matter of strictest privacy. It concerns the Foundation."

"Then of course I'll see you, Mr. Galli."

"Thank you. I suggest that we meet in half an hour?"

"Very well. I'll be here."

"No, not in the house, Miss Bellington. In one of the cabanas."

"In a cabana? Really, Mr. Galli, I don't see—"

Mr. Galli chopped the sentence in its middle. "As I have indicated, privacy is of the essence. Please do exactly as I have suggested. It will be best for the Foundation. It will be best for you."

The connection broke off.

The effect of this conversation was bad enough, but it was nothing to the cataclysmic blow Lucille suffered a moment later. She had reached for the notebook and was about to write a résumé of Mr. Galli's virtual ultimatum when Herschel said in a harsh, tight voice, "Don't bother with that hoke any longer. I heard enough of the talk from your end to figure what it meant."

What had made Herschel break into speech, shatter his masquerade of being a deaf-mute, and by doing so to rat on Mr. Galli and thus nominate himself for a casket? It was a terrific thing for a young man of his tough character to do.

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One can only attribute it to a combination of love, gratitude for Lucille's treatment, and sorrow for his sister—all those things brought his slender but still existent better nature to the front.

With Lucille the shock was more of a chain effect, her first reaction being: *he hears, he talks. He's a fraud and in it with the rest of them, whoever they are.*

"I know how this hits you," Herschel said. "It hits me, too. I'll tell you how it hits me. I'll try."

He told her all he knew, which wasn't much, as he had never been in Mr. Galli's confidence but had simply done the job given to him. For the money that was in it—the two thousand that would have paid for Estelle's operation. "Useless, now," he said.

As for the plot against the Foundation, he hadn't the slightest idea of its nature. Only one thing he was sure of: once Lucille got in Mr. Galli's power, her reputation would be shattered, and conceivably her life would be forfeited. He touched on Mr. Galli's mysterious client and the fact that Madame Alcott was also a partner in the evil enterprise. He stressed the client's ruthlessness—consider the murder of Jones and the poisoning of Mr. Dasher. As for himself, if Mr. Galli and his client were to learn that he had quit his masquerade of a deaf-mute it would mean his own death—or as he put it, "I'd end up on the slab."

The good shone out to Lucille. It was for her safety that he now placed his life in jeopardy. Her love, never far absent, swept overpoweringly back. No matter what Herschel had done in the past, she knew that she would always love him; no matter what his punishment would be, she would be waiting.

This was all very well, and on the highest possible plane, but it did not answer the question of what they were to do about Mr. Galli and the cabana rendezvous. Herschel resolved this quite simply: Lucille would go, meet Mr. Galli, and find out what cards he held, while he, Herschel, would be concealed outside the cabana in readiness to play his own hand as circumstances might dictate.

"I have been made aware through Madame Alcott's reports, Miss Bellington, that you are seriously disturbed. That you are contemplating the folly of even withdrawing from the Foundation. I felt I must prove to you that any such stupid move shall not occur."

"Shall not, Mr. Galli?"

The confines of the cabana held a nightmarish pressure, a captive intimacy with a power for evil, exemplified in the sveltely tailored person of Mr. Galli.

"Not," he went on, "unless you wish to be exposed in every newspaper in the country as secretly conducting an affair with Herschel

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Pompey, even while posing as a paragon of virtue and the fiance of Mr. Dasher. Furthermore, you would be branded as a traitor to the United States."

Naturally Lucille was stunned. That her senses reeled would not be putting it too strongly, while Mr. Galli gave her a verbal résumé (as compiled in a cleverly pieced-together photostat) of her written notes with what the press would label her secret lover, Herschel. This was "hot stuff," culled from the Swinburne quotes.

The traitor angle was similarly taken care of by her indignant reactions to the news items selected by Herschel—especially her comments on South American ex-dictator's legal battle against extradition. The net results—*all in her own handwriting*—would crucify her. And it was iron-tight.

Mr. Galli wanted to know: did Miss Bellington now see the light? Would she be a good girl and follow instructions regarding the *sub rosa* use of the Foundation?

Admittedly, weaker vessels might have cracked. But not Lucille. She refused unconditionally. She even took a suicidal step by vowing that she would expose Mr. Galli's cooked-up evidence of her moral turpitude and treason, even if it took a lifetime and her entire papaya fortune. Her indomitable intention was to expose Mr. Galli to Stuff Driscoll and, via him, to the proper Federal authorities. What's more, she would attend to the matter at once.

"Miss Bellington," Mr. Galli said almost sympathetically, "you leave me no alternative. The Foundation will be just as suitable to our purposes with you dead. It will stand, inviolate from the law and from suspicion, as a memorial to your honored name."

Even a child could recognize this high-flown verbiage as a sentence of death. It was a sentence that Mr. Galli proceeded immediately to put into effect. He clutched Lucille about her throat and was adroitly strangling her when he noticed that Herschel had stepped into the cabana.

Although annoyed at having an eyewitness to his disposal of Lucille, Mr. Galli still regarded Herschel as an ally—a fact that simplified Herschel's wresting of Lucille from Mr. Galli's grasp. Now if there was one thing certain about Mr. Galli, it was his ability to sum up a situation in a flash. He realized (a) that his *fanfaron* had ratted, and (b) that his *fanfaron* was about to take him physically apart. So he left the cabana like a bat.

This did not reassure Herschel for one minute. Nor Lucille. Both were certain that Mr. Galli was outside in the darkness and would make every effort to eliminate them before they could get in touch with Stuff Driscoll. They decided not to go back to the Bellington house with Mr. Galli somewhere in am-

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bush along the way, armed perhaps with a revolver obtained from the usual convenient glove compartment of his car.

They settled on the clever strategy of going to Griptread Tires. There they would acquaint Lyle with all the perfidy, including Madame Alcott's status as a conspirator (she being still presumably in conference with the convalescent over the "Revels Humane"), and they would telephone Stuff Driscoll from the sanctuary of Lyle's home.

With cautious steps they made their way through the tropical shrubbery. They found Lyle limp on a chaise-longue in the Florida Room with Madame Alcott seated fulsomely in a chair by his side. Then safe at last from Mr. Galli and his murderous impulses, even though he was still on the prowl outside, Lucille exposed the entire evil mess to Lyle. Also, for Madame Alcott's outraged and shocked information, she revealed Herschel's admirable act of self-sacrifice in ratting on Mr. Galli's racket and coming over to the side of the angels.

With this off her chest, Lucille headed for a telephone.

If stage directions were called for at this instant they might seem a trifle involved. We have Lucille stepping toward a telephone that rested on a corner stand. We have Madame Alcott lunging at her in a towering rage to prevent the call, and we have Herschel professionally tackling Madame Alcott around her generous middle and bringing her to a halt. It was not this, however, that checked Lucille from reaching the telephone. She was stopped, held spellbound, by a torrent of invective that streamed with bullet force from Madame Alcott's unhampered lips.

The essence of the tirade was that Lucille was a fool. Herschel was not only a fool but a rat fool. Even should Lucille telephone that species of a Gestapo named Stuff Driscoll, either Mr. Galli or Mr. Galli's client, whose power was illimitable, would see that matters were properly attended to before Mr. Driscoll could reach them.

Madame Alcott digressed momentarily to spew out some data on said client. He was, of course, the ex-dictator from South America, and his vicious plot was to get behind-the-scenes control of the Foundation, to use it as a base for the storage and shipment of arms to his country. To stage a successful counter-revolution—the only way in which he could return without having his brains blasted out.

At this point Madame Alcott was forced to forage for breath, and Lucille, pretty well hitting the nail on the head, took the opportunity of telling Madame Alcott that she was insane. Herschel, Lucille declared with a glowing conviction, would protect them. Lyle, even though convalescing, would also exert

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whatever strength he could muster in their defense.

Madame Alcott, her pump working again, laughed. It was a nasty laugh, typical of just such a situation; it had the ring of triumph in it.

"Herschel?" she asked, "Herschel protect you? While Lyle Dasher is covering him with a gun in his hand?"

Lucille received her final blow: Lyle indeed was covering Herschel with a deadly Luger.

Lyle was the murderer!

Lucille's thoroughly shattered state of mind brought her voice down to a whisper. "Lyle—oh, no!"

Oh, yes, Madame Alcott exulted in a bravura of victory. Mr. Dasher was more important even than the ex-dictator. He was the Leader. He was the secret head for stirring up sabotage, unrest, and revolution throughout South America. He had appreciated instantly the value of the Foundation as an underground headquarters.

Just what else Lyle was, or had appreciated, was cut short by Lyle who now took charge. He announced in a cold, commanding voice that the four of them, with no further nonsense or delay, would take a ride out to the shark-infested Gulf Stream in his cruiser.

At this dramatic moment, with death staring one half of the quartet in their chalk-white faces, a diversion occurred in the form of a jalousie door being opened behind Lyle and a voice saying, "I will take it from here, Mr. Dasher."

But Lyle was in no mood to play second fiddle. He said with icy, Leader tones, "I am quite in control of the situation, Mr. Galli."

"The name, " Stuff said, pressing the muzzle of a .38 against Lyle's stiff spine, "is Driscoll."

During the hour or two between the moment Stuff Driscoll pricked Lyle Dasher's megalomaniac balloon and the later meeting that took place in the Granada Room, a few official acts were recorded.

Mr. Galli was scooped up from amid the subtropical shrubbery. Madame Alcott and Lyle Dasher were placed in custody. The three of them, incidentally, would soon be transferred to Washington where the F.B.I. and the State Department would take over. And similarly, General Mendoza Conti was lifted from his Miami mansion and being held incommunicado prior to his now certain deportation to South America and his bullet-spiced desserts.

It was after these routine matters were concluded that Stuff joined Lucille and Herschel in the Granada Room to explain the still puzzling details of the case. Supplied by Hopper with a selection of open-face Danish sandwiches and a tall papaya punch, he started from scratch. As the only conceivable interest to us in the harangue lay in its highlights, here is a list:

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The Rev penciled by Jones on the match folder did not stand for the beginning of "Revels Humane." It was the start of the word Revolution.

Lyle Dasher confessed in his signed statement why he had thrown in with the revolutionists. Stuff amplified this with psychiatric footnotes on the Warped Brain, and with several references to known cases in the past of important people, industrialists and so forth, who had also been hornswoggled and swept up by the revolutionary tide.

The poison that had upset Lyle (plus Dr. Young and the lab boys) came from the Mexican flame vine that draped the palm tree trunks encircling the gazebo.

At this point, Stuff presented Lucille and Herschel with a leisurely quote on said poison, lifted from *Principal Toxic Plants,* an article prepared by Dr. Edward Larson of the Medical Research Unit and Julia F. Morton of the Morton Collectanea, University of Miami.

The quote: *Senecio confusus Britten,* Mexican flame vine. Climbing woody vine with flowers like daisies but orange in color. Popular ornamental. Toxic portion: All parts of plant. Effect: Irritates skin of sensitive persons. Internally, severely poisonous.

The weapon of the crime had been a length of this vine. Lyle, who was of course the Voice, had been in a complete state of nature but for his plum-toned Janssen swim trunks when he realized that a stranger, Jones, was also hidden in the hibiscus and had been eavesdropping on Lyle's talk with the supposedly deaf-mute Herschel. Quite obviously the man had to be killed, and on the spot.

Being in swim trunks, and hence having no knife or other weapon with which silently to dispose of this wirily muscular-looking character, Lyle attempted to rip off a length of the Mexican flame vine for use as a garrote. Unable to tear the tough stuff with his hands, *Lyle chewed it apart with his teeth.* Being definitely sensitive to the poison, this later resulted in the "pimples on his lips" and the stomach convulsions so falsely attributed to the Friggoni stone crabs.

Naturally when, earlier in the evening, Dr. Vic Young at last identified the poison for Stuff as the noxious vine, the traces of which were also in the groove of strangulation and among the scrapings from Jones's fingernails where he had clawed at the garrote—all this plus the effects on Lyle of his chewings sent Stuff hightailing it for Griptread Tires where he arrived on the scene in, yes, the nick of time.

Stuff touched as gently as possible on Estelle's brutal murder. On Lyle's being told by Herschel at the gazebo of Estelle having voiced her doubts on the Founda-

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tion to Lucille, and on Lyle's having observed Herschel *talking* with her on the sands (thus exposing his chicanery and surely all else), the heir of Griptread Tires came to a typical Leader decision that Estelle was a potential menace and had better be eliminated. He did so with his skin-diving equipment, including an aqua-lung, while the girls were taking their swim.

Happily, there was a pleasant ending to this otherwise grim tale. In view of his reformation, of his endangering his life by ratting on Mr. Galli, and his saving of Lucille, the potential charges against Herschel Pompey were, with the Governor's influence, quashed.

The Foundation (minus Lyle's fortunately silent partnership), the Governor's political reputation, the Bellington escutcheon—all emerged unscathed by any taint of scandalous publicity.

The "Revels Humane" took place on schedule in a welter of handsomely gowned women, penguined men, and with his Excellency the Governor dispensing his customary charm in an opening address. Lucille, by this time entirely pulled together, was on the dais at his side.

As for Lucille and Herschel—surely no one could doubt it!—they are destined to spend the rest of their lives in that blessed state so fashionably known as togetherness.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **HAL ELLSON**

TITLE: ***The Back Stairway***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: New York City

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *An unusual story, deliberately written in a hard, clear, simple style . . . Further comments after you have finished reading.*

His last fifteen cents. Gordon looked at the coins on his lm, went to the stand, and ught a frankfurter. He ate it ickly and walked on. A few mines later he found himself in imes Square.

A moving ribbon of lights shed the news high up on the imes Building. A gaping crowd ood in the street.

MARTIAL LAW PROLAIMED IN CONGO.

So what? thought Gordon, and oticed a man in the crowd watchg him. He was struck by his face, y the look in his eyes. Finally he irned and looked directly at him.

The man walked away. Five inutes later he returned. Gordon as still there. The man asked im for a cigarette.

"Haven't got any," Gordon answered. "In fact, I'm broke."

"No job?"

"No job."

"Then how about a cup of coffee?"

Gordon hesitated, then nodded his head. They went to the Automat, had coffee, and came out.

The man glanced at the crowd on the sidewalk. "Plenty of people."

"Yes."

"My name's Tony."

"Mine's Gordon."

"Doing anything special?"

"No."

"Care to take a ride uptown a way? I've got to pick up something at my room."

"All right."

They boarded a bus and rode uptown.

"What business are you in?" Tony asked.

"None. I'm on the loose," Gor-

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don answered, and produced a big switch-blade he was carrying.

"What's that for?"

"I always carry it, and I know how to use it."

Tony nodded. Gordon casually put the knife back n his pocket. He wasn't afraid, but he wanted to make sure Tony knew he had it.

They left the bus and went to a cheap rooming house in the Fifties, between Eighth and Ninth Avenues. Tony went up and came down and they returned to Times Square. They had another coffee and some pie in a restaurant and walked around, talking of fighters.

At eleven they knew as much of each other as they cared to tell, and they were back at the rooming house.

"Where're you sleeping tonight?" Tony asked.

"I don't know."

"Want to come up to my place?"

Gordon hesitated, but he didn't know where else he could go and nodded his head.

Tony took the elevator. Gordon walked up the back stairs—four flights.

Tony was waiting at the door to his room. He laughed when he saw Gordon panting.

"Another flight and I wouldn't have made it," Gordon said.

"Well, it's done. Come on in."

They entered the room and Gordon looked around. It was a real dive, with a single bed, faded yellow walls, and no pictures.

Tony was watching him. Thei eyes finally met.

"Not so nice, but it could b worse," Tony remarked and sa down on the bed.

Gordon took a chair. The talked some more. Finally Ton said, "I guess you're wonderin what I do for a living."

"That's none of my business."

"Well, I'm a crap-game hustler.

"You make a living at it?"

"I manage to get by."

Gordon nodded. His face showe doubt.

"You don't believe I hustle, d you?" Tony said. "Well, I don blame you. I guess both of us hav doubts about each other."

"You were wondering abou me?"

"About the knife."

"What about it?"

Tony grinned. "I had an ide you were a character. Some kind o clip artist."

"No, the knife is just for protec tion."

Tony nodded and yawned. "Ge ting late," he said. "I'm going t turn in. What about you?"

"I could use some sleep."

"Good."

Tony stood up. Gordon did too and they both prepared for bed Tony hid his wallet in the botton drawer of the bureau.

Gordon noticed and though That's how much he trusts me, bu I can't blame him—he's probabl thinking about the knife.

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They slept in the same bed that night.

Gordon awoke the next afternoon. Tony was gone. He didn't return until evening.

It went on like that: Tony hustled for money while Gordon remained in the room most of the time, waiting for evening. No demands were made on him. He could leave when he wished, or stay. It was up to him.

"When you find a job, we'll split the expenses." That was all Tony had said.

He's a nice guy, Gordon thought, but he still had doubts about him. Besides, this was too good to last. As for finding a job, daily he promised himself he'd look for one, but he never did. All day he stayed in the room, sleeping and reading. At night, when he went out to eat with Tony, he always used the back stairway so the rooming house proprietor wouldn't see him.

Two weeks passed, then he and Tony had a minor argument. Tony left in a huff. Gordon heard his steps fade away on the stairs.

The quiet of the house came back, a deep silence. Suddenly the room seemed too small.

He finished his cigarette, undressed, and doused the light. Darkness filled the room. Immediately those four dingy walls, already so close, seemed to be moving in on him.

Quietly he went to the window and lifted the shade. The window was closed. Tony's work. He flung it open and felt the night air moving into the room.

There was nothing to see outside but a single, tiny bathroom light that was no more than a slit in a blank wall. The sky was dark and aloof.

He went back to bed, but he couldn't sleep. Woven into the cool air drifting through the window were fragmented sounds and the soft, sonorous purring of the city—a nocturnal eddying that seemed like the very life-breath of the vast network of life outside. It was a quiet yet morbid sound.

He closed his eyes. Quick and soft, then, footsteps echoed in the hall, passed, and someone whispered, "Hurry!" The whisper was so close he sat bolt-upright.

A door closed down the hall. Then there was nothing but silence.

The footsteps didn't bother him. He was used to them. People came and went anonymously here. He expected them, as he used to expect the attendants in the institution which he'd left—men making the rounds at night, a flashlight spraying the dormitory walls, footsteps all through the night. Voices.

But the whispered "Hurry!" that had been so close to him moments ago turned his body cold. Now he felt the speaker was in the room and standing beside him. It was someone he knew, and his flesh turned to ice.

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But no one was there.

His heart slowed its beat again. He waited, then looked about the room.

A nebulous whiteness swirled like smoke in the dark. It's the mirror, he told himself. But he was still frightened and half expected someone to appear before him.

No one did. He waited for the footsteps to pass through the hall once more. They didn't, and the door which had closed didn't open.

This wasn't an unreasonable sequence. Doors opened, closed, or were left ajar here. Footsteps came and went, fragments of conversation threaded the narrow corridor, and no one in all the world could decipher the comings and goings, or guess what was happening within this rat nest.

The thought was heartening, but it didn't help for long. He couldn't shake off the fear. Once more his heart began to pound.

The walls of the room were closing in again. He couldn't breathe, couldn't do anything but wait to be crushed. His nails sank into the flesh of his palms.

Suddenly he remembered the Blue Room—so called for the single bulb that lit its bleak interior. The patients in the hospital never said much about it, and none wanted to be sent there. Gordon had told himself he'd never be.

He went there for fighting with another patient. Vividly now he remembered the two attendants who met him—the one who spoke, and the one with the glove.

He saw the glove too late. It exploded in his face and he fell to the floor.

A week later he returned to his regular ward, tame as a fly, remembering nothing but the feeling of walls that threatened to crush him.

Now he understood why this room bothered him, why all the rooms he'd stayed in did. This knowledge released him from the fear he'd hidden from himself and he was able to lie back on the cot again.

But immediately his thoughts returned to the Blue Room. He saw the blue light, the gloved hand; he saw himself sprawled on the floor and the attendant standing over him.

Suddenly he began to shiver. With immense effort he brought himself under control.

That's the past. They'll never get me back there. But why am I afraid? he asked himself; and he had his answer in the question—fear of being brought back to the hospital.

I'm not insane, he told himself; but who believes it of himself if he is?

It was better not to think like this and he rolled over. Oddly, he heard no footsteps, but the door of the room opened and closed so quietly that he thought he was dreaming. A chill set him trembling. Someone was in the room.

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If it were Tony, he thought, he'd ave switched on the light.

The light didn't go on. He held is breath and waited. The one ho'd entered moved across the oom. He wanted to scream.

"Tony?"

"You awake?"

"Yes."

The switch clicked on the wall, ie light blazed. Gordon looked p, blinking his eyes.

"What's wrong with you?" Tony id.

"Nothing. Why didn't you put ie light on before?"

"I thought you were sleeping."

"Couldn't," Gordon answered. le sat up and looked at the brown aper bag Tony was holding.

"Coffee? I brought back two con-iners."

Gordon nodded. "You came ack early."

"I had to make it fast tonight." He took the containers from the ag, then met Gordon's eyes. There as an expression in them that ordon had never seen before. He ooked away. Tony handed him a ontainer.

It was bitter coffee. He drank it nyhow. That way he didn't have o speak. The two of them sat like rangers till they emptied the con-ainers.

Then Tony stretched out on the ed. Gordon knew he was watch-ng him.

Waiting for me to speak, he ought. It's my move.

"You hustled up a game?" he said.

Tony nodded, a faint smile on his face.

"That was real fast."

"Real fast, but too close for comfort."

"What's that mean?"

Tony smiled unpleasantly. A long scar on the side of his face seemed unnaturally white.

"Too close for comfort," he said again.

"What was?"

"Getting the money."

He couldn't have got it running a floating dice game tonight. He'd been gone too short a while.

"What happened?" Gordon asked.

"I rolled a guy."

"You're kidding."

"Not at all. It looked easy. The guy was drunk. I followed and got him in a side-street next to a theater alley," Tony went on. "A real tough baby. I belted him and he wouldn't go down. I almost busted my hand on him."

He lifted his right hand. It was swollen. "So I had to get tough," he said calmly as he examined his hand.

"How tough?"

"I mugged him." Tony raised his eyes. "It was him or me. I had to do it."

Gordon was stunned, but his face showed nothing. A moment later the real shock came.

"I think I killed the guy."

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"You're joking."

"No. The guy finally went down in a lump, but he started to yell. I had to give him an extra squeeze. Something cracked. It felt like his windpipe."

The coffee came burning up in Gordon's throat. He didn't want to believe this.

"How could you be sure?" he asked.

"Because I happen to know. I killed a man like that in the war," Tony said almost casually, as if the experience hadn't touched him at all.

Perhaps it hadn't. Gordon wasn't sure. Oddly now, he no longer felt shocked and couldn't explain this to himself.

At any rate, nothing had changed. Tony was still the same person. He didn't look like a murderer. Gordon thought of several attendants he'd known at the hospital. Their faces were inhuman. Tony's was only hard and knowing.

"Anyway," he said at last, "I've got the money for the room, so we don't have to sleep in the gutter."

This, too, was put casually, and its full meaning didn't hit Gordon for several moments. Then he felt sick. For he realized he was at least partly responsible for what had happened.

He looked at Tony and saw no sign that he felt anything. It had been merely an accident. Anyway, he'd killed before, in the war. To-night it had probably been muc simpler.

Tony was undressing now. Go don kept watching him, and h didn't seem worried. At last he la down on the bed. He glanced at th light, then at Gordon.

"Going to sit up all night?" asked.

"No."

"What's the trouble?"

"Suppose the cops find out wha happened?"

"Don't worry about it. The won't. Nobody saw me; and I dic n't leave anything behind."

"They still might find out."

"How?"

"I don't know. Sometimes the do."

"What's the matter? Scared?"

"No."

"You don't have to be. It's m concern."

"Maybe we ought to blow out o here."

Tony smiled. "You are scared Want to leave?"

Gordon didn't answer; but h wasn't afraid—at least, not for him self.

"We're good for another week i this dump," Tony went on. "An I'm starting to like the place. No that it's anything like home."

The last words stung Gordon Home? He'd never had one, neve would now. It would go on lik this forever—a succession of chea rooming houses and hotels.

Oh, God, he thought, and stood

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up. Tony was still smoking. That kept him from switching off the light. But Tony understood why he was waiting.

"Put it out," he said.

The light went off. The eye of the cigarette glowed in the dark.

"Pretty cool after the rain," Tony said.

"Is that why you closed the window?"

Tony laughed. A moment later the glowing end of the cigarette made an arc and vanished, snuffed out in a tray. The springs of the bed complained. Silence followed. Within a minute Tony was fast asleep.

He always went off like that, and Gordon envied him. Apparently the mugging meant nothing at all to him.

It couldn't have, thought Gordon, remembering the coffee. After killing a man, he'd picked up the containers on his way back to the room.

The silence was deadly now. Gordon waited, hoping to hear a sound outside, or in the hall. Nothing broke the quiet. The whole city had gone down in a cloud of dust.

For Gordon the city returned sometime beyond noon and in the same cell-like room. Tony had left. The house leaked sounds. The city's daytime clamor rose drowsily toward the pale summer sky.

Another day of heat and emptiness. It was better to sleep . . .

It was always gray in the room. When he opened his eyes again, the gray was deeper. A wavering figure stood in it and finally came into focus.

A policeman. Another stepped through the door. Then the man who owned the rooming house. His thick-lensed glasses gleamed dully.

"What's wrong?" Gordon asked, jumping out of bed.

The first policeman said, "Get your clothes on. You'll find out soon enough."

The second policeman went to the bureau, picked up a wallet, and examined it.

"This is it," he said, and pulled open the top drawer of the bureau. His hand went in. He lifted a big switch-blade knife and held it up.

"And this clinches it," he said.

Gordon's heart dropped. "Wait," he said. "There's been a mistake."

"And you made it," said the first policeman. "Get dressed."

"But the knife . . ."

"It's not yours?"

"It is, but . . ."

"It killed a man. That's his wallet."

Gordon was stunned, but he understood now—the argument last night with Tony.

Tony had used his knife on the man he'd killed and left the wallet behind to put the guilt on him. It was all clear now.

"Tony," he shouted. "He did it."

"Who's Tony?"

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"We roomed together here. He's the one. Last night . . ."

The policeman turned to the old man who owned the rooming house.

"Know anybody named Tony?" he asked.

The old man stared through his thick-lensed glasses, shook his head slowly, and pointed at Gordon. "I only rent one to a room, and that's the fellow," he said.

"No, that's not true," Gordon cried out. "You've never seen me before. You couldn't have."

"Couldn't have? You think I'm blind because of these glasses?"

"It's not your eyes. But you never saw me because I always used the back stairway."

The old man's jaw fell slack. "The back stairway?"

Gordon nodded and smiled. "So you wouldn't know there were two of us in the same room," he said, and turned to the policeman.

The policeman cleared his throat and frowned at the old man whose mouth was agape again. "What about that?" the policeman asked him.

The old man hesitated, as if uncertain of himself; then he raised his voice. "I live here twenty years. I should know," he said, and paused.

"Know what?" said the policeman.

"There is no back stairway in this house."

EDITORS' NOTE: *Surely we agree that Hal Ellson's "The Back Stairway" is a thought-provoking and disturbing story. But do we all agree on the author's meaning?*

Was Tony a real person? If so, why was there no back stairway? Is the explanation strictly supernatural?

Or was Tony purely imaginary? Another self wholly imagined by Gordon, victim of a split personality? If so, did Gordon also imagine the back stairway?

And who was the mugger?—a real Tony who framed Gordon, or an alter ego of Gordon, part of Gordon's curious double life?

Or—to go even further (perhaps too far?)—did the mugging really happen, or was that too only in Gordon's mind? And the policemen—did they really come for Gordon, or were they too only in his mind?

What do you think?

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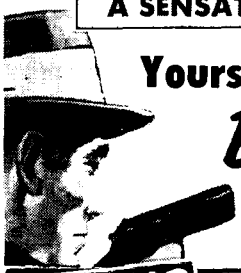

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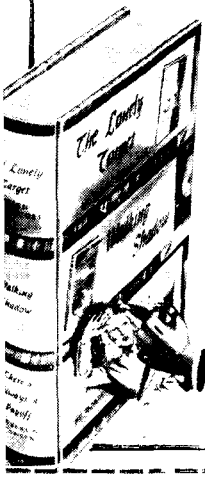

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